

Five extracts from:

Michael Baxandall. *Giotto and the Orators*.
***Humanist observers of painting in Italy and the discovery of pictorial composition, 1350-1450*,**
Oxford University Press, 1971.

[A disconcerting characteristic] of the classical system was the ease with which it brought intersensory metaphor into play. Quite a high proportion of the terms of ancient rhetoric were metaphors from visual experience, metaphors sometimes half-dead it is true, but which the humanists necessarily re-activated imply in the course of learning them from outside: diction could be *translucidus* or *versicolor* [transparent or motley]. In the much smaller body of classical art criticism there was a similar ease of metaphor, and here a high proportion of the terms carried connotations from rhetoric.¹ When Pliny describes a painter as 'gravis ac severus idemque floridus ac umidus' [dignified and severe but also very florid],² the words refer back to a complex of critical uses in rhetoric. This habit of metaphor—both the established repertory of the ancient terms and the institution as such—was potentially one of the humanists' most effective critical resources; we shall see later that much of Alberti's accomplishment in his treatise *De pictura* depends on it. (1971: p. 17)

[Preceding Leonardo Bruno's analysis of Plato in *De interpretatione recta*, Bruno discusses how far the translator of a text should try to reproduce the form as well as the matter of what he is translating.]

As those who are painting after the model of one picture a second picture take over from their model the figure, posture, movement, and form of the whole body, and study not what they themselves might do but rather what that other painter did: so too in translations the good translator will with all his reason, sensibility, and purpose change and measure transform himself into the original author of the text, and will study to imitate the figure, posture, movement, colour, and all the lineaments of his discourse.³

... The statements about painters one can derive from the sentence are these: (1) painters sometimes paint pictures after the model of other pictures; (2) they then adopt the figure, posture, movement, and bodily form of the model; (3) they also think not of their own but of the copied painter's model; (4) in these respects they resemble the translator of a text ... As observations about painting—either absolutely or as likely to throw light on the translator's art—these are clearly valid to a degree that raises questions about the nature of Bruni's inventive habits in a sentence of this kind. In fact, as the context of the sentence makes clear, the kernel of sense in Bruni's period is a proposition about literary translation: 'interpretes optimus formam primae orationis exprimit.' This proposition blossoms into a period through a process of ornamental comparison with another activity, painting. But the basis of the comparison is not the proposition. It is rather the fact that a number of critical terms Bruni was used to applying to literature—*figura*, *status*, *ingressus*, *color*, *lineamenta*, *forma*—were by origin visual metaphors and so applicable to painting too. This double applicability, a typically humanist sort of *tertium comparationis*, was a lexical fact, the classical habit of metaphorical interchange between the critical terminology of literary and art criticism. *Figura* is both a body or its shape, and a rhetorical figure of speech; *status* is an attitude or posture, and also the type of issue being argued; *ingressus* is a man's gait or movement, and also the opening of one's discourse; *color* is both hue and rhetorical embellishment; *lineamenta* and *forma* are the features and form of both bodies and speech. To accent all this, Bruni holds back the most specially visual of his terms, *color* and *lineamenta*, and applies them to literature

¹ There are interesting studies of ancient critical metaphor by S. Ferri, especially 'Note esegetiche ai giudizi d'arte di Plinio il Vecchio', in *Annali della R. Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa*, serie II, vol. xi, 1942, fasc. ii-iii, pp. 69-116; and also in general, G. Becatti, *Arte e gusto negli scrittori latini*, Florence, 1951, especially pp. 50-60, with a bibliography. See also R. Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, New York, 1953, pp. 414 ff.

² *Natural History*, xxxv. 120.

³ The treatise is printed, omitting only some of Bruni's examples, in the edition of Hans Baron, *Leonardo Bruni Aretino, Humanistisch-Philosophische Schriften*, Leipzig-Berlin, 1928, pp. 81-96.

only; in the protasis and for painting they are merged in the more general term *forma*, and only in the apodosis is *forma* broken down into its constituents *color* and *lineamenta*. The period therefore grows out of two kinds of thing: a proposition about writing, and a series of terms that happen to make a bridge between writing and painting. The first is the matter open to ornamental development; the second is the means through which this development is to take on the form of a comparison. Given these and the will to assemble a period, the actual development becomes fairly predictable: a proposition will be phrased about painting parallel with that about writing... (1971: pp. 25-27)

Alberti's treatise *De pictura* is written unassumingly, as a treatise on such a subject should be, but Alberti's Latin is still of a periodic character in the limited sense of being disposed in detail to symmetrical, counterpoised arrangements of words, phrases, and clauses. For example, towards the end of Book II of *De pictura*, speaking of the need to be very reserved in the use of pure white and black pigment, Alberti says: 'Ergo vehementer vituperandi sunt pictores qui albo intemperanter et nigro indiligenter utuntur.'⁴ White and black are treated in parallel phrases: it is wrong to use white *intemperanter*, and black *indiligenter*. The adverbs set up a delicate but intelligible distinction between the respective temptations presented by either pigment. We must not use white *extravagantly*; we must not use black *negligently*. In the Italian version of the treatise Alberti made later, *Della pittura*, this distinction is dropped: 'Per questo molto *si* biasimi ciascuno pittore *il* quale senza molto modo usi bianco o nero.'⁵ Simply, it is wrong to use white or black without much moderation. The greater differentiation of the Latin version is not purely trivial, since a little later the distinction between white and black becomes a matter for development. In the Italian: '... meno si riprenda chi adoperi molto nero che chi non bene distende il bianco.' The Latin again differs. First Alberti decorates his opinion with a *topos* from Cicero, Zeuxis' warning against excess: 'hinc solitus erat Zeuxis pictores redarguere quod nescirent quid esset nimis.'⁶ This is applied only to white. The Latin then proceeds more on the lines of the Italian: '... minus redarguendi sunt qui nigro admodum profuse quam qui albo paulum intemperanter utantur.' But here again the antithesis is reinforced by an elegant playing of *paulum* (*intemperanter*) against *admodum* (*profuse*): so, *very* profuse black is less bad than *rather* intemperate white. It is a new twist of the distinction prefigured in the adverbs of the first Latin statement. Finally both Latin and Italian state a psychological basis for the greater dangers of white:

Natura enim ipsa in dies atrum et horridum opus usu pingendi odisse discimus. Continuo que quo plus intelligimus, eo plus ad gratiam et venustatem manum delinitam reddimus. Ita natura omnes aperta et clara amamus, ergo qua in parte facilius peccato via patet, eo arctius obstruenda est magis.

Di di in di fa la natura che ti viene in odio le chose orride et obscure; et quanta pili facendo in pari, tanto pili la mana si fa dilicata ad vezzosa gratia. Certo da natura amiamo le cose aperte et chiare, adunque pili si chiuda la via quale pili stia facile a peccare.

It is part of Alberti's distinction as a humanist that what begins as a small symmetry of adverbs—*albo intemperanter, et nigro indiligenter*—blossoms into something that is not only much larger, but also interesting. There is no need to fix on the first parallel form as a kernel or cause of his distinction between black and white; one may say that Alberti's Latin appears as friendly and responsive to differentiation between approximating cases, in the sense that the distinction finds a correlative in the structure of the Latin prose that it does not in the Italian. Since *Della pittura* is quite a close, not to say lazy, translation of *De pictura* we see Alberti's Italian discourse here only in its lapses from the Latin, not in any of its positive constructiveness; Quattrocento Italian had its own syntactical habits just as it had its own categories. But obviously the distinction stated in the Italian is not just more fully verbalized in the Latin, it is part of the physiognomy of

⁴ 'De pictura', Vatican Library, MS. Ottob. lat. 1424, fo1. 22, r-v.

⁵ *Della pittura*, ed. L. Mallè, Florence, 1950, pp. 100-1.

⁶ Presumably Cicero, *Orator* xxii. 73, where the painter is Apelles, not Zeuxis.

the prose. Alberti's play with *intemperanter/indiligenter* and *admodum/panlum* is decorative and enjoyable on neo-classical terms, and the firmness of the Latin statement cannot really be separated from its Latinity.

Aristotle says: 'The clauses of periodic diction are either separated or compared.'⁷ One could not describe better the relation between the forms of periodic diction and the matter they admit most gracefully. In much humanist discourse patterns of thought consistent with a periodic form become a substitute for what in another culture might have been some convention of dialectic, and involved all but the most unsuggestible humanists in a slovenly kind of sub-dialectical dichotomizing and syllogizing: 'paria paribus redduntur aut contraria contrariis vel opposita inter se' with intolerable insistence. A little drunk with the Ciceronian music he was making, the humanist paired and balanced, compensated and connected words, clauses, sentences—and so, almost incidentally, notions—into big conjunctive masses. So it is that one important measure of distinction in humanist writing is the degree to which the writer rides his diction, the degree to which the antithetical bias of neo-classical diction is creatively used, as Alberti uses it, to state an authentically humanist, because periodic, point of view. ... (1971: pp. 29-30)

Alberti in *De pictura*:

The ancient painter Demetrius fell short of the highest merit because what he applied himself to representing was likeness rather than beauty. So it is that one should pick out from the most beautiful bodies each of their most admirable parts. It is beauty, above all, that we should strive keenly and assiduously to understand, perceive, and represent. Yet this the most difficult thing of all, since not all the glories of beauty are disclosed in anyone place; rather are they scattered here and there. Nevertheless it is on this—on thoroughly inquiring and learning about beauty—that every effort should be spent . . . When even the practised people can hardly make out the Idea of beauty, it quite eludes the unpractised. Zeuxis, the most famous, learned, and skilful of all painters, when he was to make a picture for public dedication in the temple of Juno at Croton, did not rashly rely on his own talent in setting about painting, as almost all painters of the present day do. Rather, since he considered all that he needed for beauty could not be found in anyone body, either with his own talent or indeed even from Nature, he chose for this reason out of the whole youth of the city five maidens of the most exceptional beauty, so that he might translate into painting what was most admirable in each girl's form. He was indeed wise to do so.⁸

Very rarely indeed they might become an argument for actual artistic procedures; Alberti in *De statua*:

I took these proportions not from one particular body but rather, so far as possible, I tried to note and record the great beauty shared out, as it were, by Nature among many bodies-imitating in this the painter who, when he was to make an image of a goddess at Croton, selected all the more remarkable and graceful beauties of form from a number of the more handsome maidens there and translated them into his work. In this way I too chose a number of bodies considered very beautiful by knowledgeable judges and took their measurements. I then compared these with each other, excluding those that were extreme either in excess or deficiency, and extracted such mean dimensions as a number of measurements of internal proportions agreed on and confirmed. After measuring the principal lengths, breadths, and thicknesses of the members, what I found was the following.⁹

This sort of seriousness, however, is not typical. (1971: pp. 37-38)

⁷ *Rhetoric* III, ix, 7, 1409 b, 13-14.

⁸ Alberti, 'De pictura', Vatican Library, MS. Ottob. lat. 1424, fol. 23 r.

⁹ Alberti, *De statua*, in *Kleinere kunsttheoretische Schriften*, ed. H. Janitschek, Vienna, 1877, p. 201.

Alberti wrote his treatise *De pictura* twenty years before Fazio wrote *De viris illustribus*; it belongs to a different kind of] discourse... The difference is mainly one of seriousness; Alberti's book is not just much larger and better than anything else a humanist wrote on painting, it is written from a position of personal contact with the art and from - interest in developing method, and so becomes something of different order. Alberti was a completely equipped humanist, but when he writes about painting he no longer belongs entirely with the humanists; he is instead a painter, perhaps of a rather eccentric kind, with access to humanist resources. What interests us here is the part these humanist resources may have played in his account of painting, and if it is to be a genuinely interesting part, it will be more than a matter of the classical commonplaces and artists' names scattered over the text. [Baxandall tries] to suggest that *De pictura* is a humanist book in less obvious and more substantial ways. Four not unconnected points will recur in it. First, *De pictura* is a humanist book in the quite material sense of having been written in humanist Latin. Secondly, *De pictura* is written under humanist licence: that is to say, a treatise on painting was something acceptable within the humanists' general view of a liberal education. Thirdly, it was written in terms of skills specific to an identifiable kind of humanist reader. And fourthly, an important part of the book and its conception of painting grows directly out of the system and situation of rhetorical humanism in 1435.

For people so much given to analogy between painters and writers, the humanists were rather unspeculative about any general theoretical relationship of painting, as an intellectual activity, with their own *studia humanitatis*. Whether or not painting was a liberal art is mercifully not an important theme of the early humanists, but neither were other kinds of conjecture about *its* status. Behind this silence there are presumably a number of more or less Aristotelian assumptions about the actions of the mind, of a sort explained in a famous letter from Leonardo Bruni to a Venetian correspondent, Lauro Quirini.¹⁰ Quirini had asked him whether a man might possess isolated *virtildes* or whether *virtutes* were interdependent and indivisible. Bruni's reply depended on two distinctions. The first is between moral virtues and intellectual virtues: moral virtues being irrational and of the affections, intellectual virtues being rational and concerned with truth and falsehood. The second distinction was between natural virtues or dispositions and virtues proper, which are established by practice:

. . . every virtue is a habitual condition, but every habitual condition is acquired by exercise and practice. From this it seems clear that virtues proceed from practice and exercise. However, we have a certain natural disposition to virtues, for we clearly see that some people are more fitted for some virtues, and others more for other virtues . . . Such dispositions being innate in men, whether to liberality or courage or justice, are not virtues proper. For a virtue proper is that which has produced a habitual condition through practice and exercise. As a craftsman becomes effective by exercising his craft and lutenist by playing his lute, so does the just man by doing just things and the brave man by doing brave things.¹¹

Painting and writing are arts, and art is an intellectual virtue established by practice... (1971: pp. 121-123)

Aristotle [wrote]:

Children may ... be taught drawing—not to prevent them making mistakes in their own purchases of objects of art, nor in order that they may not be imposed on when they are buying or selling them, but perhaps rather because it makes them judges of the beauty of the human form. Always to be running after the strictly useful is not becoming to free and exalted souls.¹²

¹⁰ *Epistolarium Libri VIII* . . . , ed. L. Mehus, ii, Florence, 1741, 134-44. The letter is dated to 1441 by H. Baron, *Leonardo Bruni Aretino, Humanistisch-Philosophische Schriften*, Leipzig-Berlin, 1928, p. 215.

¹¹ op.cit. pp. 142-143.

¹² *Politics* 1338 a-b.

In 1404, Pier Paolo Vergerio expanded and rather coarsened this in the most influential of all the humanist treatises on education, *De ingenuis moribus* :

There were four things the Greeks used to teach their boys: letters, wrestling, music, and drawing (*designativa*), which some call portrayal (*protraetiva*) ... Nowadays drawing does not in practice pass as a liberal study except so far as it relates to the writing of characters-writing being the same thing as portraying and drawing-for it has otherwise remained in practice the province of painters. But as Aristotle says, among the Greeks activity of this kind was not only advantageous but also highly respected. When buying vases, paintings, and statues, things in which the Greeks took much pleasure, it was an aid against being cheated over the price; and it also contributed much to comprehending the beauty and grace of objects, both natural and artificial. These are things it is proper for men of distinction to be able to discuss with each other and appreciate.¹³

This is only prescription and there is no reason to think that a humanist education generally included painting lessons in any important way. The point to be made is simply that there was in principle some licence for humanists who might wish to practise drawing or even to have it taught in a school. And to a humanist an art was by definition something taught through precepts: a humanist book on the subject was not urgently needed or demanded, but *if* someone wanted to write one, there was at least a niche for it in their system. It was this niche Alberti's *De pictura* filled, more expansively than any humanist except Alberti himself could have had in mind. Book I is the earliest account of the optics and geometry of representing three-dimensional objects on plane surfaces, pictorial perspective. Book II is the first account of pictorial composition. Book III, the least substantial, is still the first extended discussion of how painters stand to other artists, particularly writers. Book II is systematic and divides painting into three parts: circumscription (or delineation), composition, reception of light (or tone and hue).¹⁴

¹³ *Petri Pauli Vergerii De ingenuis moribus et liberalibus studiis adolescentiae etc.*, ed. A Gnesdotto, 1918, pp. 122-3.

¹⁴ For a general bibliography on studies of Alberti, see *Encyclopedia of World Art*, i, New York, 1959, s.v. 'Alberti', pp. I88-2I6, and the article on Alberti by Cecil Grayson in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, i, Rome, 1960, 702-9. Creighton Gilbert ('Antique Frameworks for Renaissance Art Theory: Alberti and Pino', *Marsyas*, iii, 1943-5, 87-106) has pointed out that the three books follow the classical form of the isagogic treatise: (1) elements, (2) the art, (3) the artist.

De pictura therefore becomes a book for people with three necessary skills. It is, first, for people able to read neo-classical Latin quite freely: that is, humanists.¹⁵ Secondly, *De pictura* is a book for people with some grasp of Euclid's *Elements*, since to follow the series of demonstrations through which Alberti explains his perspective construction in Book I is strenuous geometrical optics. Not every historian is at ease with it now, and those who are seem to disagree with each other about what Alberti is saying; it is unlikely Florentine mechanicals or indeed humanists found it much easier. Alberti himself remarked on its difficulty: 'huiusmodi est ut verear ne ob materie novitatem obque hanc commentandi brevitatem parvum a legentibus intelligatur.'¹⁶ Thirdly, the treatise is for a reader who draws or paints at least potentially or notionally, since much of it is addressed to someone who may perform the operations that are described.

The designed reader is therefore a humanist practised in Euclid and himself disposed to draw or to paint. This *is* not the typical humanist; to a certain extent, perhaps, it was all an ideal in Alberti's own image. But a group equipped with the skills presupposed by *De pictura* did exist in the pupils of Vittorino da Feltre of Mantua, and in a sense the book seems obliquely directed to this school. Alberti dedicated *De pictura* not to Brunelleschi but to Gianfrancesco Gonzaga, Marquis of Mantua,¹⁷ Gianfrancesco was a condottiere, not a humanist, and could hardly have read the book himself; but his librarian, the reader and eager distributor of his books, was Vittorino da Feltre. For Vittorino in turn the library was an activity secondary to the school he ran in Mantua with Gianfrancesco's support and protection. The school, the Casa Giocosa, was maintained by Gianfrancesco at first as an amenity for his own children, perhaps later also for its own sake, and under Vittorino's direction it was the most progressive and, with Guarino's, the most celebrated of all early

¹⁵ For various reasons the Italian version, *Della pittura*, is now more often read: it is available in modern printed editions, it is very interesting for the history of Italian technical prose, it has a preface addressed to Brunelleschi. It seems nevertheless a rather perfunctory translation from *De pictura*, sometimes off-hand to the point of being incomprehensible and—so the tally of manuscripts suggests—much less widely current in the 15th century than the Latin was. By the end of the 15th century the existence of *Della pittura* seems to have been forgotten; the 16th century made its own new translations into Italian direct from the Latin. Alberti's copy of Cicero's *Brutus* (Biblioteca Marciana, Venice, Cod. lat. 67. cl. xi) carries an autograph note on its last page: Die veneris ora xx3/4 quae fuit dies z6 augusti 1435 complevi opus de Pictura Florentiae (G. Mancini, *Vita di L. B. Alberti*, Florence, 1882, p. 141); but this does not necessarily refer to the Latin rather than the Italian version. The best MS. of the Italian version (Biblioteca Nazionale, Florence, MS. II. IV. 38) ends with the note: Pittura: Finis laus deo die xvii mensis iulii MCCCC36; but this could refer to the manuscript, not to the Italian version as such. An opinion about the precedence of one version over the other therefore depends mainly on the internal quality of the texts themselves. Much the best discussion of the editions of the treatise is in two articles by Cecil Grayson. 'Studi su Leon Battista Alberti, II, Appunti suI testo della *Pittura* (*Rinascimento*, iv, 1953, 54-62), distinguishes and illustrates the kinds of variation between Latin and Italian that point to the priority of the Latin. 'The text of Alberti's *De pictura*' (*Italian Studies*, xxiii, 1968, 71-92) lists 3 manuscripts of the Italian, two of them very poor, and no less than 19 of the Latin, 10 of these being of the 15th century; and, distinguishing two major groups among the Latin manuscripts, argues persuasively for a sequence of: (1) MSS. reflecting a first Latin edition of 1435, (2) the Italian translation of perhaps 1436, (3) MSS. reflecting a somewhat revised Latin version, perhaps associated with the dedication to Gianfrancesco Gonzaga. The text used in this book, Vatican Ottob. lat. 1424, would belong to the second, revised group of Latin manuscripts. A text of the Latin version has been twice printed (Basle, 1540; Amsterdam, 1649) but it differs in detail from the text of most manuscripts. There are a number of modern editions of the Italian version: the most recent is L. B. Alberti, *Della pittura*, ed. L. Malle, Florence, 1950. An English translation is L. B. Alberti, *On painting*, translated by J. R. Spencer, London, 1956.

¹⁶ MS. Ottob. lat. 1424, fol. 10 v.

¹⁷ The dedication was published by H. Janitschek in his edition of Alberti, *Kleinere Kunsttheoretische Schriften*, Vienna, 1877, pp. 254-5.

humanist schools.¹⁸ But Vittorino himself was not a humanist of the more exclusively literary kind. Pisanello's portrait-medal of Vittorino has on its reverse the inscription: MATHEMATICUS ET OMNIS HUMANITATIS PATER, and this is an exact description of his main interests. He was a distinguished enough literary humanist to be appointed to the chair of rhetoric at Padua when Gasparino Barzizza left for Milan in 1421; but he was also a mathematician, and this is more singular in a humanist. All the contemporary accounts of Vittorino make much of his mathematics, especially his geometry, and of his association at Padua with the great geometrician *Biagio Pellicano* of Parma. It was an association that attracted picturesque detail: Vittorino, oppressed by Pellicano's avarice, was said to have worked as a *jamulus* in his house to pay off tutorial fees.¹⁹ But the fact of the association was certainly real and is important, since Pellicano was the author of *Quaestiones perspectivae* and is now considered the immediate source of the early-fifteenth-century developers of linear perspective.²⁰ Not to labour the point, Vittorino was one humanist very well able to take the Euclidean technicalities of *De pictura* I in his stride.

But Vittorino projected his own interests into his school, where mathematics played an unusually important part; here the contrast with the severely philological bias of his friend Guarino at Ferrara is marked. The details of Vittorino's syllabus are admittedly not very clear; fifteenth-century accounts were more interested in the humane moral tone of the Casa Giocosa than in quite what was taught there. But it seems that Vittorino believed in teaching mathematics in the first place through play; he contrived mathematical games.²¹ It is clear that some pupils reached a high standard. In July 1435, two months before Alberti finished his treatise, the Florentine humanist Ambrogio Traversari visited the school and afterwards remarked on the quality of work by the third and most talented of the Gonzaga sons, Gianlucido, then aged fifteen years. The work he had seen included 'propositiones duas in Geometria Euclidis a se additas cum figuris suis':²² two Euclidean propositions with figures. Like Vittorino, Gianlucido could have read *De pictura* I with some understanding. Geometry, as was more usual in a fifteenth-century commercial education, was taught in conjunction with surveying—the calculation of the areas and volumes of fields and barrels—but also together with drawing.²³ And it seems that some sort of professional instruction in drawing was available too. Francesco Prendilacqua, a pupil, gives a list of miscellaneous specialist teachers employed by Vittorino, and in this *list*, along with people like grammarians and dancing-masters, are *pictores* :

Neque deerant grammatici peritissimi, dialectici, arithmetici, musici, librarii graeci latinique, pictores, saltatores, cantores, citharaedi, equitatores, quorum singuli cupientibus discipulis praesto erant sine ullo praemio, ad hoc ipsum munus a Victorino conducti ne qua discipulorum ingenia desererentur.²⁴

¹⁸ Most of the contemporary accounts of Vittorino and his school are conveniently collected in *II pensiero pedagogico della umanesimo*, ed. E. Garin, Florence, 1958, pp. 504-718. For a modern bibliography of studies of Vittorino, E. Faccioli, *Mantova: Le Lettere*, ii, Mantua, 1962, 44-6. A standard account in English is W. H. Woodward, *Vittorino da Feltre and other Humanist Educators*, Cambridge, 1921, pp. 1-92.

¹⁹ Francesco da Castiglione, *Vita Victorini Feltrensis*, in E. Garin, op. cit., p. 536.

²⁰ See particularly P. Sanpaolesi, 'Ipotesi sulle conoscenze matematiche statiche e meccaniche del Brunelleschi', *Belle Arti*, ii, 1951, 37, and A. Parronchi, *Studi su la dolce prospettiva*, Milan, 1964, pp. 239-43. For the *Quaestiones* see G. Federici Vescovini, 'Le Questioni di "Perspectiva" di Biagio Pelacani da Parma', *Rinascimento*, II. ser., i, 1961, 163-250.

²¹ ...morem ilium eruditissimorum Aegyptiorum magnopere probans, qui liberos suos in numeris per ludum exercebant'. Sassuolo da Prato, *De Victorini Feltrensis Vita*, in E. Garin, op. cit., p. 530.

²² *Latinae Epistolae*, ed. L. Mehus, Florence, 1759, (VII. 3) p. 332.

²³ W. H. Woodward, op. cit., p. 42; but I have failed to find Woodward's source for this statement.

²⁴ Francesco Prendilacqua, *Dialogus*, in E. Garin, op. cit., p. 660.

These *pictores* are unlikely to be the sort of painter who painted frescoes or altarpieces; they come in the *list* after *librarii* and are presumably book-illuminators. Yet it is difficult to see what they could have-taught anyone if not drawing or painting, and it seems likely that in some degree, probably quite limited, Vittorino was sponsoring the humanist licence to draw. On the whole, his school, seems the *ambiente* most able to make something of Alberti's book.²⁵

De pictura then, appears a- handbook in the active appreciation of painting for an unusual kind of informed humanist amateur. Book I, its geometry and perspective, is only humanist in this special sense and is not something open to the general run of humanist. Book II, on the other hand, is a thoroughly humanist affair because it depends from Vittorino's other interest, the literary rhetoric central to humanism. As Book I with its perspective is written in terms of geometrical skills locally available in Mantuan humanism, the medium of Book II and its account of composition is the language and categories of rhetoric; and so it concerns us here as Book I does not. Book I sees painting through a Euclidean, Book II through a Ciceronian screen.

The central subject of Book II is pictorial composition, the way in which a painting can be organized so that each plane surface and each object plays *its* part in the effect of the whole. Here .. *Alberti* seems to be calling Italian painting back to some standard of narrative relevance, decorum, and economy. The standard may well be largely Giottesque, as it appeared in *Giotto* himself —whose *Navicella* is the only actual composition praised by Alberti—and less certainly in such neo-Giottesque painters as the obscure and recently deceased Masaccio. On the other hand, the standard is not classical: 'Vix enim ullam antiquo rum historiam apte compositam, neque pictam, neque ftam, neque sculptam reperies.'²⁶ Alberti urged high standards of relevance and organization in a climate of public taste, particularly humanist taste, that often favoured painting less rigorous in this respect. In Mantua, as in so many other Italian courts, the Marquis had employed Pisanello since 1425;²⁷ even in Florence Palla Strozzi, the pioneer Greek humanist, had set a standard and tone for humanist patronage by commissioning Gentile da Fabriano's *Adoration of the Magi* (Plate 14) of 1423. For humanists the ekphrastic virtues of painters like Gentile and Pisanello were the most accessible and convenient to talk about.

Alberti's weapon in this situation was his specialized concept of 'composition'. *Compositio* was not altogether a new word to use about works of art in the general sense of the way things are put together. Vitruvius had used it of buildings and Cicero of human bodies;²⁸ it is not uncommon, either, in medieval aesthetics. All these uses were certainly part of the background to Alberti's use of the word, but he himself used it in a new and exact sense. By *compositio* he means a four-level hierarchy of forms within the framework of which one assesses the role of each element in the total effect of a picture; planes go to make up members, members go to make up bodies, bodies go to make up the coherent scene of the narrative paintings:

Compositio is that method of painting which composes the parts into the work of art ... The parts of the *historia* are bodies, the parts of the body are members, the parts of the member are plane surfaces.²⁹

²⁵ Alberti dedicated his later book *De statua* directly to a pupil of Vittorino da Feltre, Giovandrea de' Bussi (1417-75), Bishop of Aleria, with the remark: 'Mea tibi placuisse opuscula, id quod de pictura et id quod de elementis picturae inscribitur, vehementer gaudeo.' The dedication is printed in Alberti, *Kleinere Kunsttheoretische Schriften*, ed. H. Janitschek, Vienna, 1877, p. 167.

²⁶ MS. Ottob. lat. 1424, fol. 10 v.

²⁷ For a bibliography of studies on the problem of Pisanello's activity in Mantua, see Maria Fossi Todorow, *I disegni del Pisanello*, Florence, 1966, pp. 32-5.

²⁸ Cicero, *De officiis* I, xxviii. 98; Vitruvius III. i. I.

²⁹ MS. cit., fol. 15 v: 'Est autem compositio ea pingendi ratio qua partes in opus picture componuntur. Amplissimum pictoris opus. non colossus, sed historie. Maior enim est ingenii laus in historia quam in colosso. Historie partes corpora, corporis pars membrum est. Membri pars est superficies. Prime igitur operis partes superficies, quod ex his membra, ex membris corpora, ex illis historia.'

Alberti was providing a concept of total interdependence of forms that was quite new, rather unclassical and, in the long run, much the most influential of the ideas in *De pictura*. (1971: 124-130).