

# The New York Review of Books

## The Lion of Florence

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Joseph Connors

*Leon Battista Alberti: Master Builder of the Italian Renaissance*

by Anthony Grafton

Hill and Wang, 417 pp., \$35.00

*On Alberti and the Art of Building*

by Robert Tavernor

Yale University Press, 278 pp., \$60.00

1.

“A solution must be found. After so much has been spoken and written, it was a question both of science and national pride, a debt of honor to the dignity of our Nation.”

With these words Mussolini switched on a powerful pump that began to drain the water from a lake in the volcanic hills south of Rome, the Lake of Nemi. The year was 1927. In the course of the following weeks the water receded and the hulls of two Roman ships, with many bronze fittings and some of the marble revetment of the decks intact, began to emerge. They were imperial barges from the time of Caligula, probably used in religious rites connected with the Temple of Diana on the shore. The ships were important to the Fascist regime both as Roman artifacts and as documents of Renaissance archaeology.

The first attempt to raise them, as everyone knew, had been made by the most famous humanist of the early Renaissance, Leon Battista Alberti. It was important to Mussolini to show that his regime could succeed where even Alberti, one of the archetypal “universal men” of the Renaissance, had failed. Indeed, the senator invited to preside over the salvage operation was Corrado Ricci, the author of two books on Alberti. The ships were winched to the shore, much photographed and visited, and by 1932 installed in a new museum. They would still be one of the great sights of the Roman countryside, had they not been put to the torch by retreating German troops in 1944.

In 1446, when he tried to raise the ships, Alberti was forty-two. He was then composing the first treatise on architecture since antiquity, a work in ten “books” to rival the *De architectura libri decem* written by Vitruvius in the Twenties of the first century BC. Alberti’s long treatise, the *De re aedificatoria*, even though written in dense Latin and circulated during the author’s lifetime only in manuscript, eventually became the most influential book on architecture to come out of the Renaissance. After he finished it, and nearing fifty, Alberti turned from his literary pursuits to take up the practice of architecture. Among fifteenth-century architects only Brunelleschi rivals him in quantity and quality of achievement. Not until 1665, when the young astronomer Christopher Wren was called in to restore the cathedral of London, would an improbable career change again have such an impact on the course of architecture.

Alberti was born in Genoa in 1404, out of wedlock. The family had been one of the richest banking clans of fourteenth-century Florence, with branches in London, Spain, and the Low Countries. But one by one the leading men of the clan, including Alberti’s father and grandfather, had been exiled from Florence by a rival political faction. Alberti’s father named the boy Battista, after John the Baptist, patron of the city he would never see again.

The double stigma of exile and illegitimacy clouded Alberti’s youth, which was passed between Venice, Padua, Genoa, and the towns of the Po Valley. This watery world fostered an interest in ships, flood control, and issues of public health in cities on beaches and in bogs. Alberti was fascinated by the hydraulics of the Venetian lagoon and by buildings that sink into ooze. When he first saw the half-buried temples of the Roman Forum his explanation was that they had sunk into a swamp. His metaphor for foundations—snowshoes—was resurrected in Bernini’s time when the façade of St. Peter’s began to sink into an underground stream. Alberti wrote a book on ships and composed horrific stories about shipwreck. To raise the ships of Nemi he called in divers from his native Genoa. Exile gave him interests that would not have come so easily had he been brought up in the green valley of the Arno.

Alberti’s father put the boy in the best boarding school of Padua and supported his education in Venice and Bologna. But he died when Alberti was sixteen, and relatives unforgiving of his bastardry tried to deprive the orphan of his inheritance and with it access to higher education. The young man passed through a phase of stress and depression. But he took adversity as an occasion for training his will, studying until, in his words, the letters on the page turned to spiders. Cultivation of the will would become an obsession with Alberti. Willing and able, *volere* and *potere*, are an inseparable pair in his vocabulary. For relief from legal studies he turned to

mathematics, but he also found an outlet in painting and modeling. He had no known teacher, but his studies allowed him to see the interaction between mathematics and art in a way that no conventional apprenticeship would have. Seldom has an amateur exerted a greater influence on the arts.

Alberti received his doctorate in law from Bologna in 1428, the year when the ban on his family was finally lifted. But he had been raised in too long an exile to seek a career in Florence. Anthony Grafton, whose extremely informative book comes principally out of a study of literary humanism and scientific culture, has many fascinating things to say about the career patterns open to humanists like Alberti. In the early twentieth century the great schoolmasters of the early Renaissance, men like Gasparino da Verona or Vittorino da Feltre, were seen as lanterns of learning who protected their charges from vice while grafting humanist learning onto the rootstock of Christian morals. Grafton is decidedly less reverent. Indeed, he seems to take a positive delight in exposing the vulgarity of the learned. He resurrects the poem about a prostitute that a budding humanist dedicated to the young Alberti, and he describes fights in the antechambers of the Vatican between distinguished scholars who were rolling on the floor, “clutching each other’s testicles and poking at each other’s eyes.” The book is peppered with such passages.

For Alberti, the rewards of acceptance into the ranks of the learned were considerable. Just as today speakers of elegant English are valued in Brussels, even though that is not the language of the land, speakers and writers of flawless Latin were valued in the courts and capitals of Italy, especially the papal curia and the Florentine chancery. Good grammar and a flawless Ciceronian style could stave off wars, buttress ancient privilege, and demolish pretensions based on forgery. And there was no better way to demonstrate one’s skill than to become a forger oneself. So Grafton’s book opens with a performance of a Latin play, *Philodoxeos*, written by the young Alberti but passed off as the work of one Lepidus, a fictional author who would remain in the canon of Roman Silver Age poets until the nineteenth century. It is the world of neo-Latin letters that bred Alberti and gave him his start, quite different from the goldsmith’s shop that produced Brunelleschi or the quarries where the young Michelangelo learned his trade.

After graduation Alberti attached himself to several highly placed clerics and was given a post in the papal chancery as an abbreviator, or summarizer of long papal bulls. He was legitimized and took minor orders in order to enjoy the income from benefices. Although he does not seem to have been ordained as a priest he moved in a clerical world and absorbed more than his share of its endemic misogyny. He usually wore clerical dress, and when he looked at the oculus of the Pantheon the first image that

came to mind was a tonsure.

After the long “Avignon captivity” and a subsequent schism the papacy had finally returned to Rome in 1420, but it did not receive a warm welcome from the Romans. Alberti came to live in the Vatican in 1433 but the following year the Pope, Eugene IV, was forced by a mob to flee. He took his court to Florence, where he stayed for nearly a decade. Thus Alberti, at the age of thirty, finally came to live in the ancestral city of the Albertis. His command of the local dialect was at first unsteady but he mastered it and soon became an advocate of the vernacular in the quarrel that pitted it against Latin. He organized a public contest in vernacular poetry and wrote the first grammar of Tuscan, the language that has become modern Italian.

The years in Florence, 1434–1443, were a period of what we would now call the formation of Alberti’s identity. He had written a treatise on the Florentine family just before leaving Rome and had hoped it would win him the approval of his relatives. It did not, and after the initial disappointment he sought solace in the formation of a unique individuality, independent of family ties. He wrote an autobiographical sketch, unsigned as though written by an admirer. In it he appears as a man of great athletic prowess, who could dance, race, play ball, ride unbroken horses, throw the javelin, shoot arrows through armor, jump as high as a man’s head, pitch apples over the cathedral roof and coins that rang on the vaults. He sang and played the organ, wrote poetry and “dinner pieces,” short dialogues in the manner of the Greek satirist Lucian. He could foresee the future, look through men’s souls with a glance, stand extremes of heat or cold, and deliver himself of pithy sayings like the Greek philosopher Thales. Gems, flowers, and beautiful landscapes restored his spirit, but the sight of boughs weighed down by autumn fruit always made him ask himself what fruit he had produced for the family of man.

This anonymous life was published in 1843 and attracted the attention of Jacob Burckhardt, the great Basel historian of the Renaissance. He used it as the core of a chapter on the development of the individual in his *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, first published in 1860. There Alberti’s picture of himself is transmitted in all its undiminished glory, not because Burckhardt was incapable of skepticism, but because Alberti’s genius served as the foil for what came afterward: “And Leonardo da Vinci was to Alberti as the finisher to the beginner, as the master to the *dilettante*....”<sup>1</sup>

Grafton is deeply interested in historiography, which is one of the things that makes his book different from any of the books on Alberti that preceded it. He has not only read Burckhardt but plowed through his notes in the archives and reconstructed the context

in which he wrote. His opening chapter, “Who was Alberti?,” which looks at first as if it’s going to be the usual biographical sketch, is meant to be read as, “Who has Alberti been thought to have been?” In it he sketches the universal man of early-twentieth-century historians, but also the ironic, skeptical satirist rediscovered by recent scholarship.

In postwar Italy the literary historian Eugenio Garin described an authority-hating Alberti drenched in cynic philosophy and trapped in a world of dissimulation. This Alberti seemed a perfect match for the malaise of Italy’s “years of lead”: he was seen as the skeptical philosopher, the reviver of Lucian’s irony, the anticlerical cleric, the man of the permanently unhealed wound. Garin’s scholarship formed the basis of the work of the late Manfredo Tafuri, a Marxist architectural historian who tried to uproot the age-old picture of Alberti as the man who inspired Pope Nicholas V in his plans to restore Rome. For Tafuri, a veteran of the barricades of ‘68, it was no longer possible to see Alberti as a collaborator with the established order.

## 2.

In his autobiography Alberti says he turned to painting and modeling as a diversion from letters. Around 1438 he cast a bronze portrait medal of himself, the first hesitant work in a genre that Pisanello would shortly afterward raise to the level of court art. The medal (see illustration on page 77) shows Alberti in lordly profile, like the obverse of an ancient coin or a cameo portrait of a Roman emperor. He is togate, eagle-eyed, proudly untomsured. His hair is cropped in the courtly style adopted by the lord of Ferrara, Leonello d’Este, whom Alberti was visiting at the time he made the medal. There is an inscription, “L.BAP,” the L for Leo, a private name he would reveal only to intimates. (In public documents Alberti always signs himself as Battista.) Leo suggests a leonine personality, worthy of the symbolic beast of Florence, the lion. The medal also shows a strange disembodied eye borne aloft by eagle’s wings, crackling with lightning like the thunderbolts of Jove. The eye of the artist is elevated to celestial heights and made godlike. Alberti’s emblem conveys his imagined self with the mystery and force of the hieroglyphs he thought he could decipher on the obelisks of Rome.

Alberti’s Florentine years were a time for serious encounters with the arts. He frequented the workshops and made friends with the great names of the Florentine avant-garde. After a year in Florence Alberti wrote a short treatise on painting, *De pictura*, in which he applied Euclidean geometry to painters’ formulas for perspective. Writing not as a theorist but “as a painter for painters” (at least those who could read his elegant Latin), he used concepts of literary composition current in the world of neo-Latin rhetoric to formulate the idea of composition in painting.

Academic art theory was born in this little book. It is the origin of famous tropes known to every student of Renaissance art: that portraits make the absent present and bring the dead back to life; that a portrait of a living person in a painting draws all eyes to it; that a painting is like a transparent veil drawn through rays going from the eye to the object; that corpses in art should look dead down to their fingertips; that living bodies should show hair and limbs in movement and drapery blown in the wind; and that motions of the body show motions of the mind. A great painting is not necessarily large, says Alberti, but well composed, not crowded but built around nine or ten figures, not more than the number of guests one would invite to a dinner party, all arranged in dramatic action.

All this defines the *historia*, or, roughly, storytelling image, Alberti's most powerful artistic concept. Beginning with Mantegna it influenced neoclassical painting until the nineteenth century. Leonardo and Raphael absorbed its lessons well. The *Last Supper*—with its calculated perspectival space, its careful grouping of protagonists, its dramas of the mind worked out in motions of the body (and, one might add, its reasonable number of dinner guests)—may be said to be the most Albertian of all Renaissance paintings.

In 1436 Alberti translated the *De pictura* into the Tuscan vernacular and sent it to Brunelleschi with a beautiful letter of dedication. The great architect was then at the height of his fame. This was the year when the Pope consecrated both the cathedral of Florence, which had been begun 137 years before, and also Brunelleschi's dome, begun nearly two decades earlier and now complete except for the lantern. The *Della pittura* was a consecration present for Brunelleschi from a relatively unknown outsider trying to ingratiate himself with the great man. Grafton uses the presentation letter to make two points, both slightly exaggerated. The first is that Alberti the humanist was welcoming a mere engineer into the ranks of the literate, flattering him by asking him to emend his text. But this is to underestimate Brunelleschi's towering stature, even though his enemies had him arrested briefly at this time, and to overestimate Alberti's importance at the age of thirty-two, with nothing to his credit but witty Latin dialogues and some amateur paintings.

The second point is that Alberti had come by now to think of himself as an engineer. Indeed Alberti did admire, like everybody else in Florence, the great machines Brunelleschi had used to build the cupola, the marvelous winches and cranes that never broke down and lifted millions of pounds of material the height of a skyscraper. Alberti liked to dream up machines of his own; he later told the Pope he could devise a crane that would hold up the roof of old St. Peter's while the walls underneath it were rebuilt.

He became a surveyor and did the first plan of Rome on the principles of a circular graph. He dreamed about machines and mentions many in his book on architecture.

Alberti, however, never built great machines no matter how often he cured his insomnia by thinking them up; he never flooded rebel towns or supervised a siege. In this he stands worlds apart not only from Brunelleschi, but also from the great Sienese inventor Taccola, who left many manuscripts illustrating siphons, hoists, and weapons; or from Francesco di Giorgio, famous for his ability to blow up a castle by tunneling underneath it; or even from Leonardo, whose drawings for machines are so precise that many small-scale working models have been made from them.

But if Grafton's picture is slightly overpainted, one would hardly want to do without his chapter on Renaissance engineering, among the most engaging in the whole book. The engineer traced his roots to the medieval *ingeniator*, the man who solved problems not with texts but with wit, *ingenium*. Grafton finds a place here for topics as diverse as abacus books and Fibonacci numbers, Cardinal Bessarion's plans for machines that would save Constantinople, the competition for the Doors of Paradise and the cathedral dome, the invention of perspective, and many other aspects of what he calls the theatrical engineering culture of the Quattrocento.

Alberti returned to Rome with the papal court in 1443. In the next decade his mind turned more and more to architecture. He explored the ruins intensely, pen and yardstick in hand, often in the company of his fellow humanist Flavio Biondo. Biondo was the man who first tried to clear away a millennium of misidentification and find out, from texts and inscriptions, what the ancient ruins really had been. He started a field that would be advanced by Pirro Ligorio and Piranesi and that continues today, when each excavation for a sewer or telephone cable offers new evidence to solve old mysteries.

Alberti found that he had an eye for architecture, high flying and lightning quick. He had a sense that it was underlying geometric proportion, not ornament, that made architecture beautiful. He came to think of buildings as bodies with bones and ligatures. Indeed, the concrete architecture of the Roman empire, stripped of its marble revetment, would have looked much more like a dissected body than the pure marble architecture of Greece. Alberti could see brick ribs running through concrete vaults, and relieving arches straining inside concrete walls. He saw that the Pantheon was not simply a saucer over a cylinder but a subtle alternation of solids and voids, of columns and concrete. All its parts fitted together with the inner harmony that one could savor in a fine Latin sentence. *Concinnitas*, Cicero's word for a period that had the right ring, became Alberti's watchword, and he saw it everywhere, in nature as well as in building.

These were the insights that drove Alberti to write his great book, the *De re aedificatoria*. It cost him nearly a decade of work. He presented it to the Pope in 1452, but there are indications that he continued to tinker with it for years afterward. It shows Alberti's love-hate relationship with Vitruvius, the "sole survivor from this vast shipwreck." The manuscripts were corrupt and Vitruvius had absorbed so much Greek architectural vocabulary that to the Latins he seemed to speak Greek and to the Greeks Latin, and "as far as we are concerned he might just as well not have written at all, rather than write something that we cannot understand." Indeed Alberti wrote just at the dawn of centuries of Vitruvius editing and translating.

Alberti was an abbreviator by profession and perhaps he started by writing a short summary of Vitruvius, or, more precisely, an epitome. Epitomes are what scientists and scholars wrote when confronted with long, undigestible ancient texts. Here Grafton brings in an illuminating comparison with Regiomontanus's epitome of Ptolemy, a summary that came to be more widely read than the original. In the end Alberti rewrote Vitruvius completely. He retained the structure of ten "books" (for Vitruvius ten papyrus rolls) but into them poured a very different content. By the end he had so much material he thought of adding four more books: on ships, economics, arithmetic and geometry, and architects' services.

The *De re aedificatoria* is a very strange mixture of taut logic and anecdotal lore. Alberti loved to talk to craftsmen. They told him interesting things about the curing of mortar and the seasoning of wood, the draining of bogs and the manufacture of pulleys, and he put it all in his book. His informants generally remain anonymous. Many were humble men. But once, in a chapter on vaults, if we listen closely, we can hear Brunelleschi speaking, telling Alberti his secret for vaulting the cupola of Florence cathedral: an arch needs a keystone to stand but a dome does not, since it is made out of self-supporting rings; an octagonal vault can be raised without centering if a circular dome is buried inside it. And much of Alberti's famous definition of the architect, one that stresses reason, the devising of plans in the mind, the movement of weights and massing of bodies, seems to be a tribute to Brunelleschi too.<sup>2</sup>

Grafton is fascinated by the history of reading. Here and in many other writings he has pioneered the study of "interactive" reading, exploring the paradox of humanists who stuff themselves with ancient learning only to champion novelty and innovation. He reads the *De re aedificatoria*, with its confusing farrago of citations from ancient authors, in the light of new research on commonplace books. Humanists and scientists alike collected endless citations from the ancients which they arranged in notebooks by subject heading, *loci*, which they would draw upon when they wrote books of their

own. Alberti's commonplace books must have been very thick indeed, to judge from the abundance of quotations in his works. In one of his dinner pieces he satirizes a man who, after death, manages by some miracle to eavesdrop on his own funeral. What outrages him most? It is not the bishop's flat eulogy, or the wife who makes love to the steward in the next room, or the son who curses the old tyrant whom he thinks cannot hear him, or the servants who guzzle his wine, or the relatives who plunder his estate. It is the friends who tear up his commonplace books to make wrapping paper, destroying the chance of anyone finishing his life's work.

Alberti stuffed his book with thousands of picturesque *loci* culled from hundreds of classical texts. To use his own metaphor they are like pebbles from a riverbed, pretty in themselves but more beautiful when assembled into a mosaic. They make the *De re aedificatoria* a slow-paced book for the modern reader. But like the cartoons in *The New Yorker* these "anecdotes for amusement" were the reason why the Renaissance elite kept on turning the pages of Alberti's long book. The architectural treatises of the following century, with their clean illustrations and sober formulae for good building, gave their readers nothing quite like Alberti's word mosaics. Palladio may be the true heir of Alberti in architectural theory, but to find the same dazzling parade of amusing erudition one has to wait for a book like Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*.

### 3.

Out of Alberti's mixture of erudition, logic, and experience came prescient ideas that would transform architecture. Beauty is not the same thing as ornament. The beautiful is that which cannot be changed except for the worse; a beautiful building is one to which nothing can be added and from which nothing can be taken away. Modest materials arranged in proportional relationships are more likely to be beautiful than rich materials badly arranged. The eye can perceive harmony just like the ear. Churches should be austere and dark; shadows induce a sense of sacred fear and the finest ornament in a place of worship is a flame. Palace planning should reflect degrees of distance between the ruler and his subjects. The house is like a small city, and the city a large house. Nature delights in the measure and the mean, and so should the architect. Beauty has power to disarm the raging barbarian; there is no greater security against violence and injury than beauty and dignity.

After he had finished the book in 1452, Alberti devoted the rest of his life to building. He was based in Rome but resident for long intervals in Florence, Ferrara, Mantua, Rimini, and Urbino. An irenic figure, he dined with lords who would have cut one another's throats had they had the chance.

At Rimini he invested a modest Gothic church with what the French would call an *enveloppe*, a stone structure that completely encases the old building like a relic. He designed a façade in the form of a Roman triumphal arch to celebrate the least savory of his patrons, Sigismondo Malatesta. This petty warlord with pretensions to culture built his “temple” with wagonloads of precious stones looted from the late antique churches of nearby Ravenna. Malatesta was distrusted by Cosimo de’ Medici and “canonized to hell” by his irate contemporary Pope Pius II. This did not discourage him from likening himself to Apollo and the rising sun. Sigismondo planned tombs for himself and his beloved mistress, Isotta degli Atti, possibly on the temple façade. Set in the arches that run around the exterior are the sarcophagi of the philosophers and writers who lent their luster to this little outlaw court.

Alberti left models and instructions for the builders in Rimini but tended to supervise operations from Rome. There is a letter in the Morgan Library from Alberti to Matteo de’ Pasti, master of the works. Pay no attention to local advice on the cupola, he warns; those who built the Pantheon and the great baths of Rome have better lessons to offer. Under no circumstances was de’ Pasti to alter the proportions of the piers, or else all that music will be reduced to discord. This is pure Alberti: courteous in style but still domineering, loyal above all to the experience of Roman antiquity, attuned like no one else to the harmonic lines of his buildings.

In Florence Alberti found the patron closest to his heart, Giovanni Rucellai, a wealthy banker who had survived disastrous turns of fortune to become one of the richest men in Florence. Orphaned young, he had risen by talent to the point where he could marry the daughter of Palla Strozzi, just before that towering figure was forced into exile by Cosimo de’ Medici. Under suspicion as the relative of an exile, Rucellai slowly worked his way back from outer darkness. He aspired to wealth more than political power, and he displayed that wealth in building. He cultivated his former enemies until finally he could marry his son to a Medici. Rucellai knew the monuments of Rome at first hand, understood architecture, and had the wealth to command the finest of Florentine craftsmen. For him Alberti completed three works of the highest beauty: the magnificent marble façade of Santa Maria Novella, a palace façade that employed the classical orders for the first time, and a tomb modeled on the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem. On all these works Medici symbols alternate with the billowing sail of Rucellai, the trimmer who had used wealth and architecture to navigate out of troubled waters.

Mantua, city of Virgil, offered Alberti his largest and most frustrating commissions. Ludovico Gonzaga wanted to reshape the city around an old Benedictine abbey, Sant’Andrea, which held the holiest relics of northern Italy, two phials of the precious

blood of the Redeemer and the bones of Longinus, the centurion who had bottled the blood after piercing Christ's side. Gonzaga asked Alberti's advice. Dismissing previous projects that called for a conventional basilica, Alberti convinced him to begin a huge, impressive hall, fronted by a triumphal arch and lit by a single huge window. The structure was modeled on a late antique basilica in the Roman Forum that Alberti mistook for an Etruscan temple. His other church in Mantua was even stranger. San Sebastiano was built in an imperfectly drained swamp. Even before the floor level was raised to protect it from rising damp it puzzled viewers, and the patron's son, Cardinal Francesco Gonzaga, professed he could not tell whether he was looking at the plans for a church, a temple, or a mosque.

Mantegna was the resident court painter in Mantua and certainly knew Alberti. He chose to build his funeral chapel in Sant'Andrea. In the background of his many crucifixion scenes he reconstructed Jerusalem with all the apparatus of an authentically antique city: triumphal arches, aqueducts, spiral columns, massive gates. These backgrounds were researched in the same spirit as Alberti's explorations of the antiquities of Rome. And like the paintings, Alberti's churches helped create a *mise-en-scène* for the processions and pageants that took place around the Precious Blood. In Holy Week the phials were exhibited to the crowds inside from the top of Alberti's façade. Alberti's first triumphal arch, at Rimini, glorified a petty despot, while his last, in Mantua, glorified the triumph of the Redeemer.

The two writers under review present us images of Alberti that are not totally convergent. Grafton, the omnivorous polymath whose learning extends into every corner of Renaissance humanism, textual criticism, science, and culture, sees a personality strongly marked by the conventions of neo-Latin literary culture. His Alberti is a man who seeks collaboration and asks for advice from friends more learned than he. "Correct me," he says to Brunelleschi; "The learned ears of friends are a file for writers," he says in his autobiography. The need for emendation and the friendships it generates become for Grafton the key to Alberti's personality. Alberti asks painters to put his portrait into their work, engineers and craftsmen to tell him their secrets, and all and sundry to criticize his architectural models. His writing and his buildings are mosaics made of pebbles culled from the riverbed of the ancient world, but the content and style are fundamentally new.

It could be that in this rich and revealing picture Grafton slightly underestimates the stubbornness of Alberti the architect, the idiosyncrasy of his designs, and the revolution he effected whenever he obtained a commission. Previous architects were inevitably discarded or demoted when he arrived on the site. But Grafton's is still a powerful

attempt to see a unified personality behind the practitioner of so many different professions. He is superb on historiography and his range of reference is extraordinarily wide. The text and notes inform us about the latest developments in dozens of fields and subspecialties of Renaissance scholarship, digested like so much plankton and summarized with easy elegance.

Robert Tavernor is an architectural historian who has worked on Alberti for many years. He was a member of a team that translated the *De re aedificatoria* into English, experimented with computer graphics, built beautiful wood models, and put on the monumental Mantua exhibition of 1994.<sup>3</sup> He has examined the buildings in painstaking detail and he judiciously evaluates competing reconstructions of the unfinished buildings. He spares himself no dirty work, as one can see from his calculations on the size of the church that might be built from the two million bricks mentioned in a letter about Sant'Andrea in Mantua. If not quite so encyclopedic as Grafton, he is still very widely read, deeper on the architectural literature and readier to tackle hard archaeological problems. One learns an enormous amount about the buildings and the man from his beautiful book. Indeed it is the place to go for Alberti as master builder.

Alberti died in 1472 in Rome, his adopted city. We catch a last glimpse of him showing a group of important Florentines around the ruins in 1471, including Bernardo Rucellai, the son of his patron, and Lorenzo the Magnificent. They explored the cavernous substructures of the Roman baths and probed the soil of the Circus Maximus until their tools struck an Egyptian obelisk sunk deep in mud. It would not be raised for a century, until the obelisk mania of Pope Sixtus V (1585– 1590).

In one of Alberti's last books, a short essay on the science of cryptology, he mentions Gutenberg's invention of movable type, which had just arrived in Rome. Alberti would never see any of his books printed, but Lorenzo de' Medici would. When the *De re aedificatoria* was being printed in Florence he asked to see the sheets as they came off the presses; the finished edition was dedicated to him in 1486. The ideal public for the book was men like Lorenzo, learned, wealthy and Latinate. But they were going out of style, and the book would not have had much influence on practicing architects had it not been translated into Italian in 1546 and again in 1550. Alberti's translator, Cosimo Bartoli, a Florentine humanist who hoped to meet his hero in heaven, gave Alberti a new lease on life. But he did not convince everyone. Bartoli's good friend Vasari thought that many craftsmen had done better work than Alberti, but his books made people think that he was superior to those who were, in fact, superior to him. He put Alberti's fame down not to merit but to the fact that books (unlike art works) travel

freely and are trusted wherever they go.

In 1568, the year of the definitive edition of Vasari's *Lives of the Artists*, Bartoli translated many of Alberti's minor works, including the dinner pieces and the *Momus*. Alberti had kept this last text under wraps in the Rome of Pope Nicholas V, afraid perhaps that the corrosive irony of its satire on men in power might compromise his position in the curia. But in the post-Machiavellian world, *Momus* lost its power to shock and became simply clever literature. Bartoli felt free to dedicate his translation to the Grand Duke of Florence, Francesco I, saying it would surely amuse him and make him laugh no end.

The Alberti revival left its stamp on no one more than Palladio, who absorbed countless lessons from the *De re aedificatoria* and reworked them in his *Quattro libri*, or *Four Books on Architecture*, published in 1570. The Latinate humanist found in this book by a stonecutter's son a vehicle that would speed his ideas to a wider world.

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- 1  
Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (Harper and Row, 1958), Vol. 1, p. 150. ↩
  - 2  
The story of the cupola and its engineering problems is told in an engaging and reliable way in Ross King, *Brunelleschi's Dome: How a Renaissance Genius Reinvented Architecture* (Walker, 2000). ↩
  - 3  
See Leon Battista Alberti, *On the Art of Building in Ten Books*, translated by Joseph Rykwert, Neil Leach, and Robert Tavernor (MIT Press, 1988); and *Leon Battista Alberti*, edited by Joseph Rykwert and Anne Engel (Milan: Olivetti/Electa, 1994). ↩

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