Leon Battista Alberti

Beauty and Representation
CINQUECENTO = 1500s
SEICENTO = 1600s
ITALIAN RENAISSANCE
HUMANISM
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HUMANISM

+ Developed during the 14th-15th centuries as a critical reaction to medieval scholastic education.

+ Emphasizes the agency of human beings, particularly through what is understood today as the "humanities."
If during the middle ages, ART was subservient to gods and kings...
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during the Renaissance, it would acquire a measure of autonomy and be increasingly seen as a mirror of (social) reality.
Mirror with sighting hole

Sight line

Painting with polished silver sky
Massacio, Trinita, 1428
DE PICTURA (1435)

Leon Battista Alberti
I DIECI LIBRI
DI ARCHITETTURA
DI LEON BATTISTA ALBERTI
TRADOTTI IN ITALIANO
DA COSIMO BARTOLI
NUOVA EDIZIONE
Diligentemente corretta e confrontata coll’originale latino,
ed aggiornata di nuovi dati ricavati dalle misure medesime
assegnati dall’autore.

IN ROMA MDCLXXXIV.
Nella Stamperia di Giovanni Zampel presso Monte Giordano
con licenza dei Soppressi.
It grieved me that so many great and noble Instructions of ancient Authors should be lost by the Injury of Time, so that scarce any but Vitruvius has escaped this general Wreck: A writer indeed of universal Knowledge, but so maimed by Age, that in many Places there are great Chasms, and many Things imperfect in others. Besides this, his Style is absolutely void of all Ornaments, and he wrote in such a Manner, that to the Latins he seems to write Greek, and to the Greeks, Latin: But indeed it is plain from the book itself, that he wrote neither Greek nor Latin, and he might almost as well have never wrote at all, at least with Regard to us, since we cannot understand him.
Hey Vitruvius, what language are you speaking?
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I'll show you 10 books!
Book I: Definitions of Design
Books II and III: Firmitas (materials and const.)
Books IV and V: Utilitas (building types and uses)
Books V - IX: Venustas
Book X: General Conclusions
6 Fundamental Elements of Architecture:

1) Region / Location
2) Site
3) Plan
4) Wall
5) Roof
6) Openings
What about the columns?
In Alberti, we see the shift from COLUMN to WALL as the fundamental element of architecture.
...a row of columns being nothing else but a wall open and discontinued in several places.
For Alberti, UTILITAS can be subdivided according to needs (necessitas) and opportunities (opportunitas); that is, fitness for a given purpose.
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This is a VERY Aristotelian idea; i.e. BUILDINGS have both ACCIDENTAL and ESSENTIAL PROPERTIES.
3 Criteria of Beauty

1) Number
2) Proportion
3) Distribution
NUMBERS are found in nature in two ways: Even and Odd
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PROPORTION in architecture is the same as HARMONY in music. Both are subject to the same natural laws (Neo-Platonic?).

DISTRIBUTION is the positioning of parts relative to other parts (not necessarily the Whole).
So agreeable it is to Nature, that the members on the right side should exactly answer the left.
For Alberti, BEAUTY arises from the harmonious conjunction of NUMBER, PROPORTION, and DISTRIBUTION.
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CONCINNITAS stands above Nature itself; it is the governing principle of creation.
Hence while for VITRUVIUS nature guides architecture (it is absolutely above it)
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For ALBERTI, nature and architecture are both guided by the same principles (they stand side by side).
ARCHITECTS achieve CONCINNITAS through mathematics and painting (drawing).
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It is therefore possible to define the totality of forms in the rational soul and mind, in a way that excludes matter.
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In ALBERTI are also the seeds of a CONCEPTUAL architecture designed through DIAGRAMS.
The application of ornament can make the unpleasant parts less offensive or beautiful parts more delightful, by hiding and disguising anything ugly and by grooming and embellishing.
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I believe that BEAUTY is some inherent Property, to be found suffused all through the body of that which may be called beautiful; whereas ornament, rather than being inherent, has the character of something attached or additional.
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Yet some would disagree who maintain that BEAUTY, and indeed every aspect of building, is judged by relative and variable criteria (i.e. subjective criteria)...a common fault, this, among the ignorant -- to deny the existence of anything they do not understand. I have decided to correct this error.
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ARCHITECTURE can imitate (not copy) NATURE through CONCINNITAS. It is only through CONCINNITAS that architecture can attain BEAUTY.
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**BEAUTY** is not subjective but the product of reasoning.

**NATURE** is BEAUTIFUL because it has **CONCINNITAS**; the harmonious integration of **NUMBER**, **PROPORTION**, and **DISTRIBUTION**.

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**CONCINNITAS** is designed in / through architectural drawing.
More ALBERTI and some PALLADIO next...