

Leon Battista Alberti Biography

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Biography

Leon Battista Alberti was born in Vienna on February 18, 1404. Alberti was something of a prototypical Renaissance Man, having achieved success as an architect, painter, musician, and mathematician. In architecture, Alberti is remembered for designing the classical churches of San Francesco at Rimini and Sta Maria Novella at Florence.

As a mathematician, Alberti is most remembered for formulating the laws of perspective, which were later to have a major influence on later styles of painting. Because of his work on mathematical perspective, he has sometimes been called the originator of projective **geometry**, even though his contribution to that field was limited to establishing a starting point for further investigations.

As a painter, Alberti knew that in normal vision, the artist sees the same scene with each of his two eyes, but from two slightly different positions, and that the brain reconciles the two images to create the perception of depth. By using **light**, shading and color modification techniques, Alberti attempted to create an illusion of depth in his paintings.

The technique that Alberti finally came up with for creating perspective was to interpose a glass screen between himself and the scene of interest, and then imagine lines of light extending from the eye to each point in the scene. Where these lines intersected the screen, he imagined a set of points (constituting a *section*) mapped out. This section had the same effect on the eye as the scene itself because the same lines of light originated from the section as from the scene itself.

Alberti described many of his mathematical ideas in his book *Della pictura* in 1435 (printed in 1511). Although Alberti supplied some of the mathematical rules for creating the illusion of perspective in the book, he clearly intended that work to be a summary of his findings rather than a set of rigorous proofs. A later book of his, *Ludi mathematici* (1450) described the applications of mathematics to the fields of **mechanics**, surveying, time-reckoning, and artillery.

Alberti has sometimes been credited with the invention of the *camera obscura*, but that instrument more probably the invention of the Arabian scholar Alhazen (965-1038).