

ITALY

A to Z



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ALBERTI, Leon Battista (1404–1472)

Architect, writer, sculptor, urban planner, playwright, poet, musician - the first universally known figure of the Renaissance.

Alberti, the illegitimate son of a Florentine exile, was born in Genoa, where he studied law and physics. His athletic abilities were remarkable. He could ride the wildest horse and toss a coin all the way up to the vaulting of Florence cathedral. At Rome, in 1432, he worked on drafts of papal documents. Later he returned to the papal court to help Pope Nicholas V (1447-1455) modernize the Eternal City by restoring ancient monuments, embellishing the Trevi Fountain, and devising an urban plan that would accommodate the increased flow of traffic and provide a worthy setting for new buildings. He constantly expanded his field of knowledge by questioning all kinds of people, including shoemakers, about the secrets of their craft. He composed music, played the organ, drew portraits from memory, and wrote a Latin comedy that passed for a lost classical original. Among his writings are an essay on the ideal family. His treatises on painting - *Della pittura* (1436) - and architecture - *De re aedificatoria* (1452) - make him the chief theoretician of the Renaissance.

Alberti argued that simple geometric forms, like the circle, square, and cube, are intrinsically beautiful and that the proportions of a building should be based on mathematics. As an architect, he limited himself to design, letting others execute his projects. He probably built no more than a half dozen struc-

tures (his connection with Rome's Palazzo Venezia, begun in 1455, is iffy) and only two of them complete; no more than three were finished in his lifetime. Still, Alberti's influence reigns supreme. His stylistic evolution over the course of three decades demonstrates his progress from the use of classical elements - which he had studied in Rome - to the eclectic freedom of the Renaissance. Among the works he produced for the Rucellai family in Florence are the portal and the upper part of the façade of Santa Maria Novella, which conceals the disproportion between the high central nave and the low side-aisles with two large marble scrolls - an ingenious innovation that quickly became popular. The palace he designed for the same family - which still inhabits it on the Via della Vigna Nuova in Florence - became the model of the aristocratic townhouse; its elegant, subtly articulated street front shows Alberti's preference for pilasters over columns, whose roundness, he thought, clashed with the flatness of façades.

Alberti's fame as a designer took him to Rimini, the Adriatic fief of Sigismondo Malatesta (1417-1468), the hot-blooded descendant of a house immortalized by Dante in his *Inferno* (SEE DANTE, Aligheri). A cultured man and a humanist, as well as a brilliant *condottiere* (mercenary) who had won his first victory at thirteen, he was also adventurous and utterly amoral (he once was sentenced in absentia by a papal court to death for heresy and murder and burnt in effigy). Sigismondo turned his small court into a center of the arts and charged Alberti, whom he perceived, evidently, as a man as capable as himself, with the ambitious project of designing a marble shell for Rimini's old Church of San Francesco. Matteo de' Pasti of Verona, best known for his portrait medallions, was given responsibility for the interior. Sigismondo had been married first to an Este, then to a Sforza. When the latter, daughter of the great Francesco, was found strangled in 1448, he was already the lover of the beautiful Isotta degli Atti, whom he eventually married. Alberti's church was the shrine celebrating their love. And while it was never finished - Sigismondo's fortunes changed with the winds - the Malatesta Temple stands today as a fitting memorial to their combined genius. Its face, Italy's first true Renaissance façade, is an imaginative variation of a Roman triumphal arch. Inside rest the tombs of Sigismondo and Isotta; everywhere are their initials, an S pierced by an I. The cupola

Alberti planned for it was never built. In 1459, he went to Mantua, ruled by the Gonzaga dynasty, where he designed the churches of S. Sebastiano and S. Andrea. The proportions he used in the latter's airy, single-nave interior are repeated in its monumental front where tall pilasters remind viewers of a Roman temple; the central arch gives it an unmistakably Albertian look. Designed shortly before his death, S. Andrea is a showpiece of the Renaissance. With Filippo Brunelleschi, twenty-seven years his senior, Alberti set the pace for an age of furious building. But Brunelleschi was a doer, whose message is written in stone, Alberti was a thinker, whose structures illustrate his lofty theories. His ideas would guide the aesthetics of humanism.

AMERICA

A continent named, in a roundabout way, after Amerigo (Latin, Americus) Vespucci (1451-1512), a Florentine merchant and navigator, and a surprisingly controversial figure. Explorer, navigator, cartographer, and public servant, he was educated by his uncle, Fra Giorgio Antonio Vespucci, a Dominican friar of the monastery of S. Marco in Florence, and entered the banking house of the Medici family.

In late 1492, the Medici sent him to join their ship-chandler's establishment in Seville, Spain, run by their agent Giannotto Berardi, who helped his fellow Genoan Christopher Columbus prepare for his first trans-Atlantic expedition and who later assisted him in outfitting ships for his two subsequent journeys. We know that Vespucci knew Columbus through a letter Columbus wrote to his son Diego in 1505, saying that he had met Vespucci and that he liked him. After Berardi's death, Vespucci managed the Seville business, and once granted Spanish citizenship in 1505, became an officer in the powerful, government-run commercial agency for the West Indies. Three years later, he was appointed *piloto mayor* (chief navigator), a job he held until his death. While this title did not designate him as a competent sea captain, as Columbus was, in his capacity he recruited pilots, interviewed returning sea captains, and drew up the official maps of trans-Atlantic sea-lanes and of Spain's new territories.