Eleven years after a vast exhibition in Mantua on Leon Battista Alberti (born in Genoa in 1404, died in Rome in 1472), the Musei Capitolini of Rome hosted a dense and rich show of around 120 objects dedicated to the Roman years of the great humanist and architect of the quattrocento. The presentation is the first of a set of three scheduled to celebrate the sixth centenary of Alberti's birth. For this event, the National Committee for the VI Centenary of the Birth of Leon Battista Alberti organized seven conferences on the topic, held between 2002 and 2004.

Anyone expecting an exhibition on Alberti's architecture would have been disappointed: only his one known architectural drawing—for the plan of a thermal bath—is on display. His architectural production in Rome remains unclear, even though Arnaldo Bruschi in his catalogue essay makes a fascinating and convincing argument for Alberti's consistency, and Christoph L. Frommel, in sorting out the various opinions on Alberti's contribution to the project for Saint Peter's Basilica, suggests his role as “advisor” to Bernardo Rossellino, the architect appointed by Pope Nicholas V. As Howard Burns states in his essay, if one carefully reads Alberti's writings, namely De re aedificatoria, Ludi verum mathematicarum, and Descriptio urbis Romae, the architect's methods of understanding antiquity and its architecture become clear: the study of classical literary sources, in primis Vitruvius, and the on-site analysis of monuments, the latter to be considered even more meaningful than written texts and illustrations. Burns's brilliant and sophisticated perception seems to have guided the conception and organization of the exhibition, which reveals what Alberti absorbed from his Roman experience and how, in turn, his contribution to Rome was perceived in the artistic and intellectual context of the papal court.

Alberti's first sojourn in Rome occurred in 1432, when he lived there for a year and a half. He returned in 1443 to live in the urbs until his death, with frequent working visits to Florence, Mantua, and, perhaps, Urbino. Confining itself to this time frame, the exhibition was organized into four sections. The first, "The City," was intended to show how Rome was represented in the Middle Ages up to the end of the fifteenth century. Through this clever narrative device, the organizers could both introduce the city at a large scale or from a bird's-eye view and also demonstrate Alberti's contributions to modern cartography: on display was one of the six known transcriptions of the Descriptio urbis Romae, where he revealed a new method of urban surveying based ex mathematici instrumenti on the ability to locate the position of ancient monuments and modern churches through the calculation of polar coordinates. Attached to the written instructions on taking measurements were sheets containing the coordinates of the monuments and a diagram of a circle divided into segments of 48 degrees—"horizons," according to Alberti, and radii—that allowed anyone mediori ingegno praeeditus (with mediocre skills) to create a map of Rome within the Aurelian and Leonine walls. This method, as one could see from examining other, later maps of the city that were included, did not have immediate success, but was crucial for the territorial and urban surveys Leonardo da Vinci executed about a half century later. The show, therefore, distinguished between the medieval praxis of rendering maps, more similar to vedute, and the innovative and scientific system invented by Alberti.

The second section, "Antique Architectures," consisted of an amazing review of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century drawings of Roman monuments, both from single sheets and sketchbooks. They collectively represented the fundamental exempla of Renaissance architecture: Hadrian's Mausoleum; the Pantheon; the Colosseum; the Septizonium; the Basilica Aemilia; the fora of Augustus, Nerva, and Trajan with its adjacent markets; honorary arches; and a number of capitals, column bases, sarcophagi, and other spolia. This list of exempla includes also the Mesa tower—better known as the Temple of the Sun at the Quirinal—and the Basilica of Maxentius. In some cases, the drawings were effectively displayed beside the corresponding models. For instance, survey drawings of a detail of the external wall of the Hadrian's mausoleum by Tommaso del Pollaiolo, also known as the Cronaca, and another by an anonymous architect, were installed alongside the second-century B.C.E. corner capital of the building.

Arnold Nesselrath states in his catalogue essay that the existing material suggests that Alberti's theoretical contribution in De re aedificatoria was not particularly methodologically innovative, and the difference between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance was minimal,
entailing only the addition of Brunelleschian perspective to orthogonal and axonometric representation.\(^6\) Alberti’s real novelty lies in the “clarity of mind to which he has been able to give speech and form.”\(^7\)

For the architectural historian, the second section was the most fascinating, but also the most frustrating. The joy one felt at the quantity and richness of drawings of Roman monuments borrowed from Italian, European, and American collections and museums—probably never shown together in such measure—\(^8\) was diminished by not being able to turn the pages of, for example, the \textit{Codex Escurialensis}.\(^9\) It would have been helpful if the organizers had used digital technology to reproduce in high definition the sketchbook pages on a screen beside the objects, particularly those that have rarely, if ever, been exhibited previously.\(^10\)

The third part of the exhibition, “Humanists and Artists,” placed Alberti’s methods of understanding antiquity within the context of Rome, which in the 1430s was still a strongly medieval setting, its artistic and cultural character defined by artists and humanists who came from elsewhere, especially Florence. The installation highlighted an enterprise Alberti undertook in 1447, when, appointed by cardinal Prospero Colonna, he raised two Roman boats from the bottom of Lake Nemi. Two bronze heads from the beams of the craft were displayed along with two low-relief panels that decorated some part of it. Their preservation is due to Alberti’s scientific and technical skills in creating an efficient system of rafts and machines with ropes and hooks, as well as the broad and deep interest in the art and architecture of antiquity in the expanding circle of Roman humanists. Alberti’s technical approach, perhaps partially inspired by his earlier contact with the Sienese engineer Mariano di Jacopo, also known as the Taccola, was influential among later Renaissance engineers involved with underwater recoveries, including Francesco di Giorgio Martini and Aristotele Fioravanti (who met Alberti in 1451 or 1452). Aristotele was engaged in 1471 by Ferrante of Aragon, the king of Naples, to clear obstructions blocking incoming and outgoing tall ships from the outlet of Naples Harbor.

Alberti’s technical legacy also directly affected Fra Giocondo, or someone in his circle, who annotated with drawings one of the 1485 editions of \textit{De re aedificatoria} on view in the exhibition. As this section revealed, in the fifteenth century the interest in antiquity was divided into two camps. To the first belonged the active and erudite humanists, including Poggio Bracciolini, Biondo Flavio, Cirico Pizzicollì d’Ancona, Giovanni Rucellai, Giovanni Tortelli, Ambrogio Traversari, and Maffeo Vegio.\(^11\) Their books and manuscripts, displayed with letters that Niccolò received from Bracciolini and Traversari, show the development in literature of pre-archaeological and early philological methodologies for understanding and describing antiquity. This section took a literary approach to the issues the previous one dealt with from a “graphic” point of view.

The second camp was formed by the artists. However, in attempting, with their descriptive processes, to reproduce classical statues and scenes, artists were rarely able to recognize or identify their subject matter. In the second book of \textit{De pictura} (1435), Alberti describes through \textit{ekphrasis} the sarcophagus representing the death of Meleagrus, and claims to be able to correctly “read” it.\(^12\) The display of the sixteenth-century reproduction of a sarcophagus depicting the story is useful in demonstrating how hard it was (and is) to interpret an antique low relief. This section further suggested how some passages of \textit{De pictura} influenced Roman painting, including Beato Angelico’s \textit{Birth of St. Nicholas, Vocation, Charity to the Three Poor Girls} (1437), Andrea del Castagno’s \textit{Putto with Garland} (1448–49), and Benozzo Gozzoli’s \textit{St. Domenico Resurrects Napolone Orsini} (1461–62). All these artists arrived in Rome under Nicholas V’s pontificate and were directly connected with Alberti, who in book two invites painters to study the narratives on ancient reliefs in order to learn to represent—through the human figure—feelings and moods.

Whereas Beato Angelico was not interested in archaeology, this discipline had a great attraction for Benozzo Gozzoli, for studying the representation of both the body, as inspired by classical sculpture, and architecture. The curators elucidated the relationship between painting and classical sculpture by coupling the drawing attributed to Mantegna of the \textit{Nova Nupta} (1488–90) with its antique prototype in the fragment of a Roman sarcophagus. The section proceeded with a brief presentation of Filarete’s work in Rome, including his sculpture \textit{St. Peter’s Martyrdom}; a bronze panel he designed for St. Peter’s central gate, made from the original cast; a small equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius, the first known Renaissance replica of an ancient monument;\(^13\) and a copy of his \textit{Trattato di Architettura} from the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale of Florence.

The next section, “Collecting,” was dominated by the “Carafa head,” which—along with Filarete’s sculptures—traces all the varieties of Renaissance toreutic inspired by antiquity: the relief, the miniature, and the colossus. This magnificent giant bronze horse head, which originally belonged to Lorenzo il Magnifico, later formed part of the antiquities collection of a famous Neapolitan humanist, Diomede Carafa. Its provenance is still unclear: it could be antique or from Donatello’s circle. Another outstanding object was a Persian drawing of the 1430s of the interior of the “Tazza Farnese,” perhaps the most precious item a collector in Europe or in the East could own up to the time of the Renaissance.

The final section of the exhibition concerned architecture. Donato Bramante’s plan for Saint Peters—the famous Uffizi 20A—was installed with two drawings by Francesco di Giorgio Martini and view by the Pseudo-Cronaca of the interior of the church of Santo Stefano Rotondo. Bramante’s drawing juxtaposes, on a modular grid, the plan of the Constantine basilica, that of Bernardo
Rossellino’s project for the choir and transept sponsored by Pope Nicholas V, and the first of his own attempts at the central-plan church he presented to Pope Julius II between 1505 and 1506. The Rossellino church was represented by a 1:200 model (on display in the show), proposed by Christoph Frommel and based on the U20A drawing and the dimensional information given in Giannozzo Manetti’s De vita ac gestis Nicolai V Summi Pontefici (1455, also on view). Reconstructing the section of the transept and the choir, and juxtaposing the interior with the exterior, the model gives new insights about the project, particularly the interior corner between the choir and the transept where the solution of a pilaster flanked by a half column is similar to what Rossellino himself designed for the corner of the Pienza Cathedral façade. However, the structural system of the roof, reinforced by strong, oddly shaped brackets placed on top of massive half-octagonal piers around the perimeter of the building, is problematic and unconvincing. The brackets, placed outward in a position where no thrusts exist, are structurally useless.

In sum, the quantity and value of the objects in the exhibition were astonishing; however, the show’s logic was unclear to a non-expert in the same way that fifteenth-century Rome was unclear to anyone who lacked Alberti’s intellectual abilities. Captions were extremely concise, and unfortunately the highly sophisticated and brilliant criteria used to visualize Alberti’s methods of understanding antiquity were not apparent. Furthermore, it would have been useful for the viewer, and easy and inexpensive for the curators, to have included some images of Alberti’s buildings that show how he transformed his knowledge of antiquity into modern architecture. At least a picture of the capital at the second level of the Palazzo Rucellai’s façade might have been hung beside that of Hadrian’s Mausoleum, and an image of the corner of the Church of Santa Maria Novella included in the presentation on the Basilica Aemilia. The beautifully illustrated catalogue, however, compensates for these omissions; it explains very well and easily (at times too easily) every object in the exhibition.

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Publication related to the exhibition:

Notes
4. The problematic dating of the Descripio is reflected in the catalog: Francesco Paolo Di Teodoro dates it 1440–45 (176), whereas Concetta Bianca places it around 1432–34 (315).
5. Manoscritto Vaticano Chigiiano M. VII. 149, 3r–3v; Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vatican. See Di Teodoro, “Descripunt Urbis Romae,” in Fiore and Nesselrath, La Roma di Alberti, 176–81, where the manuscript is dated to the mid-sixteenth century.
9. This sketchbook includes mostly views of Rome and its antiquity. Cod. 28-112, Biblioteca San Lorenzo del Escorial, Monastery of San Lorenzo el Real Escorial, Madrid.
10. This happens, for instance, in front of the drawing Spolae Christi, by the Pseudo-Cronaca, Album II, 1. 429, 50v, Biblioteca Nazionale, Florence, and Francesco di Giorgio Martini, Trattati d’architettura, Codice Saluzziano 148, Biblioteca Reale, Turin. Other sketchbooks on view were Cod. S IV 6, Biblioteca Comunale, Siena, and the Codice Chiaramonti, inventario MS XVII A6, Library of the National Museum, Prague, open at 70v–71r, representing a section and an elevation of the Pantheon. This sketchbook once belonged to Giulio Romano. See catalogue entry by Nesselrath in Fiore and Nesselrath, La Roma di Alberti, 200.
13. See catalogue entry by Nesselrath in Fiore and Nesselrath, La Roma di Alberti, 312, one of the best parts of the book.


Robert Mallet-Stevens was a fascinating and central figure of the French modern movement in the 1920s and ‘30s, but his historiographic reception has been mixed. A condescending, if not disapproving, critical response to his work and the lack of established archives (the architect having himself ordered the destruction of much documentation after his death) have made him difficult to understand. Sigfried Giedion called him “elegant” and “formalist,” Theo van Doesburg labeled him “illusionist,” and Henry-Russell Hitchcock (who thought Mallet-Stevens was a Belgian architect) described him as “crude” and “superficial.” Ultimately, the critics and historians of the modern movement saw Mallet-Stevens as a secondary figure who valued aestheticism over real innovation. No critical reappraisal followed his death, and the few known drawings and documents did little to overturn his reputation as a “dandy architect.” At the same time, the paucity of information created a certain mythical aura around him.

The exhibition on Mallet-Stevens at the Centre Pompidou was the first major retrospective dedicated to the architect and its clear intent was to reestablish the stature he once had. The show presented an array of images of the man and an impressive number of documents—many