

# Liberal or Mechanical? Optical Aids and Renaissance Art

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**Abstract:** Optical and drawing aids have been known at least since Aristotle. However, they took on particular importance in Renaissance since their use was closely tied to changing notions of artistic status, competing models of perception, and not least to the formulation of a recognizably modern conception of art making.

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The question of whether Renaissance artists, both North and South of the Alps, used optical devices in making their paintings has been, since the thesis of the artist David Hockney in his book, *Secret Knowledge*, a much debated topic. This argument is a fascinating one, but in this paper I want to ask a parallel, but not identical question. Rather than debating whether they were used, I want to ask why such devices, which had been known to artists at least since Aristotle, were of interest to Renaissance artists. In particular, I will argue that optical and other drawing aids were instrumental in advancing (or retarding), the status of painters from craftsmen to artists. This issue, which is intimately connected with the traditional distinction between the liberal and “mechanical” arts, articulated a difference between “intellectual” painting on the one hand, and the reproduction of the visible world on the other.

All this has obvious relevance to the Hockney thesis. Against the then current assumption that artists worked with their hands while practitioners of the liberal arts (such as poets) worked with the brain, Michelangelo protested artists too worked with the intellect. And no less an artist than Leonardo argued (in what is known as the *paragone* debate), that artists were in fact *superior* precisely in their ability to represent the real. Thus the potential to deploy the devices of lens, mirrors, the camera obscura, etc, was both instrumental (in the literal sense of the term) as well as constructional in the making of painting – the sign of a skill set that was seen as a major justification for considering painters as learned artists.

However, this justification was something of a two-edged sword, for if drawing aids/optical devices could be counted in support of the thesis of the learned artist, then a counter position could argue that they were akin to the tools of the mechanical artist, no better, in fact, than such “aids” as the pointing tools of the stonemason. Thus artists found themselves in something of a dilemma: on the one hand they were keen to demonstrate their technical and intellectual competence, the better to climb the professional ladder; on the other these very same claims could be held up as the mark of the tradesman. I will draw for my examples on the work and writing of Alberti, Leonardo, Michelangelo, and Vasari for Italian Renaissance art, and Dürer for the Northern Renaissance.