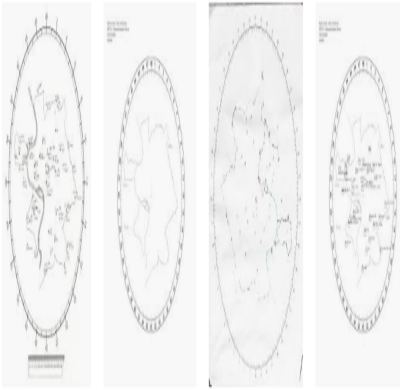




Iconophobia

Description

The OED says *iconophobia* is a *hatred of images*, though I think a *fear of images* conjures up a more vivid picture. *Avoidance of images* would probably be more accurate, and by *image* we mean pictures, diagrams, illustrations, drawings and other visual representations.

There are technical reasons for iconophobia. Here's one story I've picked up from reading around the production of the Italian architect and polymath Leon Battista Alberti (1404-1472).

Pictures and print

It was difficult enough to reproduce and disseminate texts prior to the widespread adoption of the printing press. But pictures provided even more of a challenge. Letters, words and numbers repeated by many hands over several generations could withstand idiosyncratic variations of hand and quill, but inaccuracies in drawing compounded over generations. Where they existed at all, illustrations were frequently removed in the copying process. For example, there are no surviving pictures from Vitruvius's original *Ten Books of Architecture*, if in fact he ever provided pictures.

Alberti's writing is interesting not least as Alberti was aware of the possibilities of the printing press, and that seemed to have influenced his thinking about architecture. But he was also wedded to the constraints of the old methods for reproducing texts. Only after his death was his *The Art of Building* printed on moveable type printing presses.

Prose versus pictures

As a child of the pre-press era, Alberti was suspicious of the inevitable inaccuracies that would result from the reproduction of illustrations, and so he avoided them, even though the subject matter of his book on the *Art of Building* was ideally suited to illustration. Subsequent printed editions of his book were of course populated with diagrams introduced by others. A book by Mario Carpo and Francesco Furlan provides a convincing explanation Alberti's *iconophobia*.

Alberti followed the tradition by which authors relied on textual descriptions to ensure the longevity of the (virtual) images they wished to convey, which in turn relied on the imagination of the reader, who would construct mental images from the author's vivid prose – an inevitable aspect of telling and listening to stories.

In any case, writing and drawing involve different skill sets, and not all writers can draw. In fact, I know many iconophobes who are as reluctant to draw something as I am to sing in public. (My latter inhibition is apparently known as glossophobia.) As a further digression it's interesting to contemplate the art of graphic novels and comic strips, that deliver an intimate coupling between text and drawing – a particular skill.

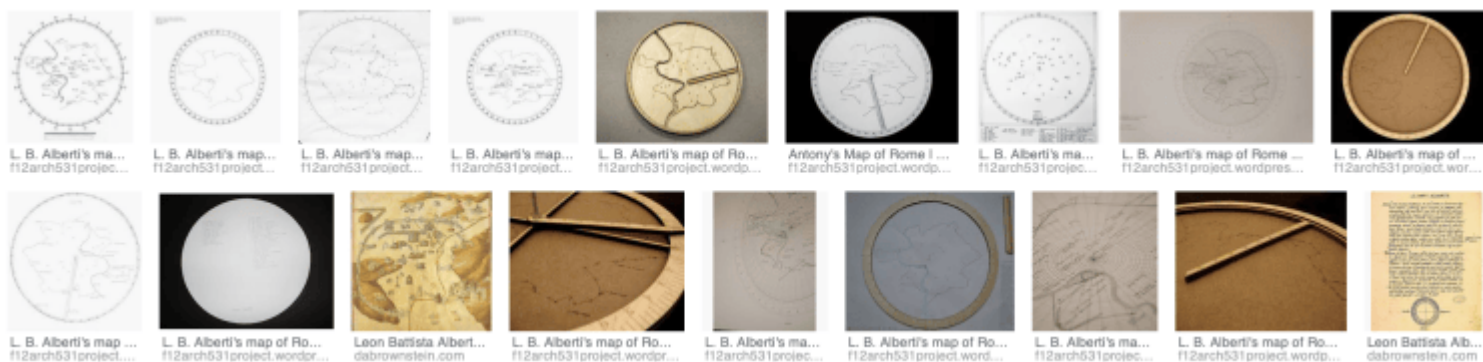
Drawing in code

Not all drawings need to be accurate, except when attempting to convey ratios and proportions, and plans and elevations of buildings and their details, as Alberti wanted to do. Cartography provides similar challenges.

As a significant illustration of his rational avoidance of pictures, Alberti famously produced a map of Rome, its boundaries, river and landmarks, not as a drawing, but as coordinates. He thought the table of coordinates could more faithfully be reproduced by successive copying than a drawing. The map could be reconstructed by anyone who wished to see it.

In that pre-cartesian era, the means of defining locations within a city were not on a two dimensional right-angled grid, but followed the methods of radial geometry, i.e. locations in space were defined by angles and distances from a single origin point in the city, the top of the Capitol Hill.

Alberti provided a detailed description of the method he used to create the map, and the tool needed to reconstruct it. The latter is basically a circle drawn on a sheet of paper (he called it a "horizon") marked out in 48 numbered segments, with 4 further divisions to each segment and a distance scale (the "spoke") that pivots at its origin from the centre of the circle as an arm on a clock face to mark out distances.



Iconophobia and IP

There are several versions of both the reconstructed map and the device online (illustrated above), though I'm not sure of the IP status of these pictures. Following Alberti, my previous paragraph was an attempt to describe something without pictures as I don't have my own drawing of the device or

map to hand. That's another justification for iconophobia in the current proliferation of images and uncertainties about intellectual property. It's cheaper to *describe* than incur the costs and risks of acquiring pictures.

Alberti's plan illustrates further his apparent interest in codes. After all, without the benefit of a computer, his tables of numbers did not allow anyone to actually see the city plan without some specialised labour translating those numbers to a drawing. I think his method of illustration fits nicely with his interest in ciphers, and is a vivid illustration of Rome rendered as a "cipher city."• See post: [Architecture and espionage.](#)

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Note

- Carpo and Furlan refer on page 4 to a passage in Alberti's *The Art of Building* which seems to endorse, indirectly, the art of descriptive prose over drawing (i.e. gestures): "Pulleys are little wheels. Levers act like spokes to a wheel. But anything of this kind - whether huge treadwheels which men turn from inside with their feet, capstans, screws, pulleys, or any such instruments - all are based on the principles of equilibrium. It is said that the main reason why Mercury was considered divine was **his ability to be clear and intelligible, using words alone, and without resorting to any gesture of the hand**. I fear I could not match this, although I shall try to do so to the best of my ability. I set out to discuss these matters, not as a mathematician, but as a workman, intending to deal with no more than was absolutely necessary."• I found this in my own copy of *The Art of Building*, page 167. Mercury is the Roman god equivalent to Hermes in the Greek pantheon. Hermes gives his name to [hermeneutics](#), the art of interpretation.

Category

1. Architecture
2. Culture

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1. Alberti
2. cipher
3. ciphercity
4. Rome

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