Reading the Stars of the Renaissance. Fritz Saxl and Astrology

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In the introduction to the volume of lectures by Fritz Saxl, which Penguin published in 1970, Ernst Gombrich remarks that ‘it would be misleading to see in Saxl’s career principally that of a devoted follower’. 1 We can sense behind these words the exceptional dilemma that confronts all students of Saxl’s work – how to assess the contribution to art history of one of the finest scholars of the twentieth century without shifting the focus to that of his so much more famous mentor, Aby Warburg. This dilemma is perhaps most pronounced in the case of Saxl’s studies on the pictorial history of astronomy and astrology, a subject which he might never have delved into seriously had it not been for Warburg’s promptings. 2 Yet, while Warburg’s shadow undeniably looms large, Saxl’s successive publications on the topic also reveal how he developed an approach to some of the problems and questions originally set by Warburg that became progressively his own. In the present paper, I hope to show a little of this development through a brief comparative analysis of Saxl’s principal theories on astrological images, with an emphasis on what is perhaps his most mature achievement in the field, his theory of the transmission of constellation iconography.

In Warburg’s footsteps: the iconography of the planets

Regardless of whether he chose to study the history of astrology out of his own interest or was stimulated to do so by Warburg, studies on the representation of the heavenly bodies and their supposed influence on the sub-lunar world form a major

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2 Gertrud Bing, in her biographical memoir of Fritz Saxl, emphasises that Saxl already had an interest in astrology prior to his first meeting with Warburg in Hamburg in 1911. See Gertrud Bing, Fritz Saxl (1890-1948). A biographical Memoir, London: The Warburg Institute, 1998, 3. Gombrich, on the other hand, claims Saxl’s interest in the subject was marginal before he joined Warburg in Hamburg. See Saxl, A Heritage of Images, 10. Salvatore Settis presents Warburg’s invitation to become his assistant in 1913 as the decisive moment when the young scholar made his choice between Rembrandt, the subject of most of his work up till then, and astrology. See Fritz Saxl, La fede negli astri. Dall’antichità al Rinascimento, Salvatore Settis, ed., Turin: Boringhieri, 1985, 7-9.
component of Saxl’s oeuvre, both in terms of quantity and in terms of the impact they have made on later scholarship. At least six major publications on the subject appeared during his lifetime. These include: Saxl’s early article on the iconographical tradition of the planet deities; three catalogues of astrological and mythological manuscripts; the appendix on the planet children accompanying Panofsky’s interpretation of Dürer’s Melencolia print; his contribution to the essay Classical Iconography in Medieval Art, also written in collaboration with Panofsky; and his booklet on Peruzzi’s ceiling in the Villa Farnesina. In these publications, Saxl developed at least three important theories on the construction and/or transmission of certain types of iconography, and confirmed a particular reading of a great work of art (the Farnesina ceiling).

Chronologically, the first of his three theories concerns the format of depiction of the seven planetary gods. Saxl formulated this theory in the article he published in the journal Islam in 1912, one year after he had met Warburg, who had encouraged him to pursue his until then only vaguely formulated ideas on the subject. Warburg himself was working on astrology at the time, in preparation for his famous lecture on the frescoes of the Palazzo Schifanoia at Ferrara, which he delivered before the international congress of art historians in Rome, also in 1912. This oft-analysed paper made the point that the iconography of the planets was one of only two visual traditions in which the ancient pagan gods survived during the Middle Ages – the other tradition being moralising mythography. Warburg considered these two traditions forms of ‘medieval bondage’, of which the Olympian deities began to be delivered only in the late fifteenth century. In the main hall of the Palazzo Schifanoia, for example, the artist Francesco Cossa and others painted a calendar cycle (1476-84) using a scheme derived from the ancient Roman astrologer

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6 Fritz Saxl and Erwin Panofsky, ‘Classical Mythology in Mediaeval Art’, Metropolitan Museum Studies, 4, 2, 1933, 228-80.
8 Saxl, ‘Beiträge zu einer Geschichte der Planetendarstellungen’. Although opinions seem to differ as to the degree of Warburg’s influence (see above, note 2), all authors on Saxl agree that Warburg encouraged his junior colleague to pursue his ideas on astrological representations.
Manilius, in which the twelve principal gods of classical Antiquity were appended to the twelve months; the scheme thus expanded the number of the gods from the reduced planetary series of seven that was more frequently combined with cycles of calendar pictures.\(^\text{11}\)

Equally important was Warburg’s emphasis on the role of the Orient in the transmission of classical iconography. With the help of Franz Boll’s recent book, *Sphaera*,\(^\text{12}\) he interpreted the three mysterious figures that accompany each of the Zodiac signs in the Schifanoia calendar as the so-called Decans – rulers of three ten-day periods in each month, a product of Hellenistic astrology known to the Renaissance via the treatise of the ninth-century Arabic astrologer Abu Mashar. Warburg also speculatively – and as has been established erroneously\(^\text{13}\) – interpreted one of the Decans figures that accompany the Zodiac signs in the Schifanoia frescoes (an image of a heroic man) as an incarnation of the ancient Greek constellation Perseus, transformed beyond recognition during its passage through the hands of Oriental astrologers in the Hellenistic era, and transmitted to the Renaissance via Abu Mashar.

Dieter Blume has pointed out that Saxl’s theory on the iconography of the planets unmistakably bears the imprint of Warburg’s thinking.\(^\text{14}\) Saxl concluded that late medieval images of the planets are iconographically far removed from the classical gods who lent the planets their names, with Mercury, for instance, being represented as a scribe (Fig. 1). He boldly argued that that these iconographical types could be traced back straight to the planet deities of ancient Babylon, where the planet Mercury bore the name of Naboo, the god of writing. The intermediary step, he thought, could be found in the unique pagan cult of the city of Harran, situated on the modern-day border between Turkey and Syria, where elements of Babylonian astrology reportedly survived until well into the days of Islam; aspects of this cult were transmitted via the eleventh-century Arabic book on magic, the *Ghaya*, and its thirteenth-century Latin translation, the *Picatrix* – a text to which, as Saxl points out, Warburg had drawn attention.

In his 1912 article, Saxl effectively proposed an uninterrupted, if only scantily surviving pictorial tradition of the planet deities leading from ancient Babylon to the medieval West.\(^\text{15}\) Three years later, however, he publicly retracted this proposition in

\(^{11}\) In the more traditional calendar scheme, the seven planetary gods were combined with their so-called houses in the Zodiac, with five of the seven gods depicted twice, as in the frescoes in the *Salone* in Padua. See also Rembrandt Duits, ‘The Waning of the Renaissance’, in Rembrandt Duits and François Quiviger, eds, *Images of the Pagan Gods. Papers of a Conference in Memory of Jean Seznec*, London: The Warburg Institute, 2009, 21-41, esp. 24.


\(^{15}\) Quite possibly under the influence of Warburg’s reading of the Schifanoia decan figure as a deformed pictorial descendent of the ancient image of the constellation Perseus, Saxl argued emphatically in favour of a purely pictorial rather than a textual tradition of transmission. See Saxl, ‘Beiträge zu einer Geschichte der Planetendarstellungen’, 169: ‘Das kann ebensogut durch eine Abbildung wie durch eine Anweisung zur Darstellung der Planetengötter vermittelt sein.’
the introduction to his first catalogue of astrological and mythological manuscripts of 1915. In 1912, no illustrated copies of the *Picatrix* had been known, but soon afterwards the first illustrated Picatrix manuscript was discovered in the university library of Cracow; confronted with this evidence, Saxl recognised that its illustrations did not contain even a trace of Arabic influence and must have been drawn solely on the basis of the information provided in the text.

Saxl’s daring reconstruction of the origin of medieval planet iconography went unchallenged for many decades. It was re-stated in Jean Seznec’s *Survival of the Pagan Gods* in 1940, and was still reproduced uncritically by Salvatore Settis in his introduction to the Italian translation of Saxl’s papers on astrology as late as 1985. It

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16 Fritz Saxl, *Verzeichnis* (1915), XIII-XIV. Interestingly, Blume, in his critical analysis of Saxl’s theory, does not refer to this revision. See Blume, *Regenten des Himmels*, 201-2.


was first contested only by Dieter Blume in 2000, in his book on the iconography of the planets, *Regenten des Himmels*.\(^\text{19}\) Blume comments on the huge leaps of faith required to follow Saxl’s proposed path of transmission, and, as mentioned above, emphasises how much the theory owned to Warburg, who was just then developing in his own tentative reconstruction of an iconographical tradition that involved a round-about route from the ancient world via the Orient to Renaissance Europe.

Perhaps equally important was the fact that Warburg entertained the notion that the belief in the stars as active agents wielding power – astrology in the narrow sense of the word – was a product of ‘primitive’ thinking cultivated in the ‘irrational’ Orient, as opposed to the more neutral mapping of the sky practised by the rational ancient Greeks.\(^\text{20}\) The planets or wandering stars were of course the primary agents to whom an influence on sub-lunar affairs was attributed, and in the light of Warburg’s views, it is hardly surprising that Saxl attempted to locate the origin and transmission of planet iconography in the sphere of oriental religion and magic.

**Towards an independent approach: the planet children**

Saxl’s second major theory about astrological images concerns the iconography of the children of the planets – depictions of the seven planets, each accompanied by specific human activities related to its particular influence, e.g. Venus with lovers, Mercury with traders, etc. (Fig. 2). In 1895, Friedrich Lippmann had published a book about Florentine fifteenth-century engravings of the planets and their children, and copies of these engravings made in northern Europe.\(^\text{21}\) Warburg had subsequently argued that these Florentine engravings in their turn must have been based on northern models.\(^\text{22}\) Saxl’s first engagement with the issue came in the form of a review, published in 1919, of a new book on German pictures of the planet children by Anton Hauber.\(^\text{23}\) Saxl considered Hauber’s treatment of the subject – a straightforward iconographic inventory – to be parochial and narrow, and argued that the iconographical formula of the planet deities presiding over a range of human occupations must be a conflation of two traditions: the Arabic astrological tradition of assigning specific human activities to the domains of each of the planets, and the...

\(^{19}\) Blume, *Regenten des Himmels*, 201-4.

\(^{20}\) Warburg was to articulate these ideas more fully in his 1919 study on pagan astrology in the age of Luther, but the seeds were unmistakably there at the time of his Schifanoia lecture. See Aby Warburg, ‘Heidnisch-antike Weissagung in Wort und Bild zu Luthers Zeiten’, in Warburg, *Die Erneuerung der heidnischen Antike*, vol. 2, 487-558. See also the English translation, ‘Pagan-Antique Prophecy in Words and Images in the Age of Luther’, in Warburg, *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity*, 597–698. For a discussion of Warburg’s ideas, see also Ernst Gombrich, *Aby Warburg. An Intellectual Biography*, Oxford: Phaidon, 1970.


western pictorial tradition of the labours of the months. In spite of his own earlier failure with the iconography of the planets themselves, he also declared once again that we should be thinking in terms of a direct intercultural transmission of images rather than of an intercultural transmission of texts with separate illustration traditions in each culture.\textsuperscript{24}

Figure 2 Anonymous artist from Florence, \textit{The planet Venus and her children}, c. 1465. Engraving. Berlin: Kupferstichkabinett. Photo: Warburg Institute.

Saxl gave a fuller account of the history of this transmission in Appendix V of Panofsky’s book on Dürer’s \textit{Melencolia} print.\textsuperscript{25} Here, he connected the medieval images of the labours of the months to Hellenistic depictions of human occupations, which he thought were derived in their turn from representations of people performing various kinds of manual chores in the tomb decorations of ancient oriental monarchs; he suggested the same Hellenistic depictions also influenced the

\textsuperscript{24} Saxl, ‘Probleme der Planetenkinderbilder, 1021: ‘Die ganze Suche nach Vorlagetexten ist wohl unnötig. Denn es ist wahrhaftig, daß wir ganz leicht die Linie verfolgen könnten... wenn uns das ganze Bildermaterial bekannt wäre. Es ist nicht von vornherein als sicher anzunehmen, daß Text-Tradition vom Orient den Planetenkinderbilder überhaupt zugrunde liegt.’

\textsuperscript{25} Saxl, ‘Die Entwicklung der Planetenkinderbilderdarstellung’.
formation of a planet children iconography in the Arabic world, which was later imported into the West via Spain, to be reunited with the western labours of the months in the great early fourteenth-century calendar fresco of the Salone in Padua (Fig. 3). This was a novel conception of a parallel but different transmission of ancient iconography via the West and via the Orient, leading to a synthesis in fourteenth-century Europe. The inspiration was still, obviously, Warburg, and the tracing back of pictorial traditions over grand expanses of space and time on the basis of a mere handful of examples was as imaginative as anything the master had ever attempted.

Saxl returned once more to the theme of the planet children, in the essay ‘Classical Mythology in Medieval Art’ he wrote together with Panofsky, published in the Metropolitan Museum Studies in 1933. Interestingly, he did not include his argument about the Hellenistic origin of images of human professions in this publication, either because he felt there was not enough room to summarise it in the text, or perhaps because he had begun to doubt its veracity. Instead, he presented the tabular representation of various human activities related to planets as an Arabic invention (Fig. 4), which resonated in the lay-out of the frescoes of the Salone. The more familiar iconography of the planet children in the form of a series of images of planet deities enthroned above humans engaged in various relevant activities he now described as a northern creation first achieved in illustrations of Christine de Pisan’s Épitre d’Othéa in Paris shortly after 1400 (Fig. 5). While Saxl’s earlier pronouncements

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27 Saxl and Panofsky, ‘Classical Mythology in Mediaeval Art’, 245-47.
on the Hellenistic origin of planet children iconography no longer figure in current literature on the subject, his identification of Christine de Pisan as the primary source of their pictorial tradition is still generally accepted.28

Figure 4 Anonymous artist from Arabia, The planets and their children, late 14th century. Manuscript illumination from Al-Isfahani, Book of Wonders. Oxford: Bodleian Library, or. 133, fol. 25v-26r. Reproduced from Erwin Panofsky and Fritz Saxl, Dürers 'Melencolia I': Eine quellen- und typengeschichtliche Untersuchung, Leipzig: Teubner, 1923, fig. 34.

Figure 5 Anonymous artist from France, Venus and her children, 15th century. Illumination on vellum, from Christine de Pisan, Épitre d’Othéa. Paris: Bibliothèque nationale de France, fr. 606, fol. 6r. Photo: Warburg Institute (part of the original collection of the Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek Warburg in Hamburg).

See, for instance, Blume, Regenten des Himmels, 149-57.
Before proceeding to discuss Saxl’s third and most comprehensive theory of astrological iconography, it is worth considering briefly one of his best-known works, the short book *La fede astrologica di Agostino Chigi*, published in Rome in 1934. This was Saxl’s interpretation of the Baldassare Peruzzi’s ceiling fresco in the Loggia di Galatea in the Villa Farnesina in Rome (c. 1511) as a personal horoscope of the banker Agostino Chigi, the patron of both the building and its decorations (Fig. 6). The notion that the peculiar constellation of deities and mythological figures on the ceiling might depict, in a mythological format, the particular arrangement of the planets and constellations on Chigi’s date of birth had first occurred to Warburg, who – according to Saxl – had set out to work with an astronomer but failed to achieve usable results. Saxl himself managed to confirm the thesis with the help of the German astronomer Arthur Beer (1900-1980). The hypothetical birth date of Agostino Chigi that was the outcome of Beers calculations has since been confirmed by documentary evidence and the astronomical calculations have been considerably extended and refined by Mary Quinlan McGrath and Kristen Lippincott. Yet, while

29 Saxl, *La fede astrologica di Agostino Chigi*.
30 Warburg’s own notes reveal he actually did arrive at a correct interpretation. See Lippincott, ‘Urania Redux’.
the booklet on the Farnesina ceiling is undoubtedly one of Saxl’s most successful single publications, it is probably one of the less interesting ones from the point of view of assessing his historical position as a scholar. Unlike Saxl’s other theories, much as they betray the influence of Warburg’s thinking indirectly, it was a straightforward adoption of one of Warburg’s ideas. Moreover, it was exceptional in Saxl’s oeuvre in dealing with a single work of art rather than a long-term process of iconographical transformation and development.

A mature theory: the transmission of constellation iconography

As indebted as the Farnesina study was to the master, so independent and novel was Saxl’s theory on the transmission of images of constellations in medieval manuscripts. Warburg himself had never dealt with constellation iconography, except for his above-mentioned suggestion to see the ancient star sign Perseus as the root of the Decan figure of the heroic man in the Palazzo Schifanoia frescoes. For Saxl, on the other hand, it was the subject on which he did the most extensive research while gathering material for his catalogues of astrological and mythological manuscripts. Images of constellations constitute, in fact, the only truly uninterrupted iconographical tradition leading from Antiquity through the Middle Ages into the Renaissance. 32 Thus, while Saxl was never able to support his theories on the origin of the pictorial traditions of the planets and planet children with adequate evidence, he managed to give a very detailed account of the development of constellation iconography through time. This account is historically important in its own right. It also contains what is possibly Saxl’s most authentic answer to one of the central questions that had preoccupied Warburg throughout his career: how to define the Renaissance as a revival of classical Antiquity.

The idea of the Renaissance as a restoration or rebirth of Antiquity stemmed of course from the period itself. 33 In the nineteenth century, however, this notion was replaced by Burckhardt’s image of the Renaissance as the cradle of enlightenment, an era of changes in which the rediscovery of the art, philosophy, and literature of Antiquity played a seminal role, but which was not a straightforward revival of ancient culture. Warburg believed passionately in this idea, as was noted by Saxl, who remarked: ‘Through Burckhardt, he learned to see [the Renaissance] as the period in which the human spirit achieved freedom’. 34 Yet, in his thesis on Botticelli, Warburg had also defended the concept of the Renaissance as the rebirth of Antiquity in art — against the prevailing opinion of the previous generation of German art historians, who, as Gombrich has pointed out, regarded the development of Renaissance art as a gradual rise of naturalism, in which classical Antiquity played hardly any part. 35 Warburg’s later work on the history of astrology gives the impression that he somehow sought to reconcile the two positions, attempting to see

33 On Warburg, Saxl and the Renaissance, see Duits, ‘The Waning of the Renaissance’.
35 Gombrich, Aby Warburg, 26-27.
the above-mentioned process of the emancipation of the classical pagan gods in Renaissance art as a reflection of the emergence of a rational world view, a cultural parallel to the formation of a rational astronomy out of the calculations on the movements of heavenly bodies done in the context of astrology, that ‘primitive’, ‘irrational’ attribution of powers to the stars which the late-medieval West imported from the Orient.36

Saxl’s theory of the history of constellation iconography also deals, implicitly, with the concept of the revival of Antiquity in the Renaissance, but in a rather different manner. Saxl first articulated this theory in his introduction to the second of his catalogues of astrological and mythological manuscripts, which is on manuscripts in the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek in Vienna, and was published in 1927.37 He presented it again, at length, in the 1933 essay he wrote in collaboration with Panofsky.38 ‘The theory claims that classical Antiquity produced images of the constellations that were precise renditions of mythological figures such as Hercules,

37 Saxl, Verzeichnis II.
and at the same time accurate maps of the relative positions of the stars that formed the real constellation in the sky. These images were copied in western Europe during the Middle Ages, in the tradition of the *Aratea*, the corpus of texts and glosses derived from the description of the constellations by the classical Greek poet Aratos in the third century BC.\(^9\) Before Saxl, Georg Thiele had already concluded that in this tradition, the accurate rendering of the position of the stars in the constellations was made subordinate to the mythological narratives attached to the constellation images.\(^9\) Saxl showed that this development was progressive. By the twelfth century, manuscripts were made such as Codex 12,600 in the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek (Fig. 7).\(^9\) The fanciful illustrator of this book drew the constellations according to his whim. For lack of space, he even reduced quite a number of them to half-figures. It is evident that these illustrations have lost any relation to celestial topography.


Next to this European tradition, there was the Arabic transmission of classical astrology, which derived from Ptolemy. Contrary to the European illustrators, the artists illustrating the Arabic manuscripts maintained strict accuracy in their rendering of the position of the stars in the constellations. With them, it was rather

\(^{39}\) Saxl based his knowledge of this tradition on Ernst Maass, *Commentariorum in Aratum reliquiae*, Berlin: Weidmann, 1898.


the mythological nature of the constellation figures that was lost. The result is clear from the illustration of the constellation of Hercules in a fifteenth-century al-Sufi manuscript in the Bibliothèque nationale de France in Paris—arabe 5036, one of Saxl’s favourite examples (Fig. 8). The relative positioning of the stars in the image is so precise that the figure could be plotted effortlessly on a celestial globe. Yet, the mythical hero who gave his name to the constellation has been transformed into a Persian warrior wearing a turban rather than a lion’s skin and brandishing a sickle rather than his traditional club.

This type of imagery, astronomically accurate but mythologically far removed from its original source, was imported into Europe from the thirteenth century onwards. It gradually replaced the images from the existing western Aratea tradition in astrological illustrations. An example is a celestial map in a fifteenth-century German manuscript in the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek (ms 5415) (Fig. 9). Here, Hercules is represented without his turban, but with an oriental scimitar. This map in its turn is closely related to the famous celestial map, which Dürer produced as a woodcut in 1515 (Fig. 10). Dürer, however, used his knowledge of Antiquity to bring the figure into accordance with classical mythology. Hercules is rendered in the nude, carrying a lion’s skin on his arm and holding a club in his hand. So Dürer’s

42 Saxl, Verzeichnis II, 19-40, esp. 36.
43 Saxl, Verzeichnis II, 25-26 and 36-37.
44 Saxl, Verzeichnis II, 25-36.
map showed, for the first time since late Antiquity, an image of a constellation that was both astronomically and mythologically completely correct.

Figure 10 Albrecht Dürer, The constellation Hercules (detail of celestial map), 1515. Woodcut. London: British Museum. Photo: Warburg Institute.

Saxl’s theory can be criticised on many points. For example, research since Saxl has made it clear that there never was one single set of antique prototypes from which all the constellation images were derived; the Ptolemaic tradition of images on celestial globes, from which the Arabic illustrations were derived, was always different from the type of illustrations with mythological content that was reproduced in the *Aratea* manuscripts. The Arabic reworkings of Ptolemy that were translated in western Europe in the thirteenth century led, within their manuscript tradition, to images that were as fanciful and astronomically inaccurate as anything the *Aratea* tradition had produced (Fig. 11). And Dürer may have known what Hercules looked like in classical times, but his antiquarian knowledge failed him with regard to other constellations, particularly Lyra. In the Arabic transmission of Ptolemy, the description of Lyra had been mistranslated, which had resulted in not just one but at least two different constellations. One of these was called Vultur Cadens, the falling vulture, which is illustrated as a heraldic bird on the celestial map in the manuscript Vienna ÖNB 5415 (Fig. 12). Dürer, or his adviser, the astronomer

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Conrad Heinfogel, probably knew that the constellation at this location in the sky was originally called Lyra, and that the classical Lyre was a musical instrument with strings. Thus, the image of the constellation Lyra on Dürer’s map became a strange hybrid, which looks like a cross between an eagle and a *viola da gamba* – a juxtaposition of the Arabic image and a contemporary string instrument, which would not have been out of place in any ‘medieval’ astrological manuscript (Fig. 13).

Figure 11 Anonymous artist from Germany, *The constellations Bootes, Corona, Hercules (2x), Vultur Cadens, Lyra, Testudo, Gallina and Cassiopeia*, 1426. Manuscript illumination, from Gerard of Cremona’s Latin translation of Ptolemy’s *Almagest* from Arabic. Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Pal. lat. 1368, fol. 51v. Photo: Warburg Institute.
Figure 12 Anonymous artist from Germany, *The constellation Vultur Cadens (detail of celestial map)*, c. 1440. Line drawing in manuscript. Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, 5415, fol 168r. Photo: Warburg Institute.

It is important to emphasise, however, that Saxl’s theory remains the only succinct and comprehensive outline of the transmission of constellation images from Antiquity to the Renaissance published until today.47 It is an elegant narrative, which follows the model of the parallel but different transmission of elements of antique culture Saxl had already developed in the context of his theory on planet children iconography. It also incorporates Warburg’s parallel between the rise of a rational world view – in this case represented by astronomical accuracy – and the restoration of classical mythology in a way that is more precise and less intuitive than Warburg’s own approach to the problem had been. Moreover, it provides an answer to a question which, as Gombrich has remarked, Warburg himself had poignantly ignored – the issue of how to distinguish the Renaissance revival of Antiquity from the various other revivals that had taken place during the Middle Ages.48 Saxl’s theory claims that only during the Renaissance, all elements of the original classical representation of constellation iconography were fully re-integrated: astronomical accuracy, the mythological aspect of the figures, and even (although this aspect was left out of the above summary) style. Saxl’s theory, as Salvatore Settis has argued, was in this respect a precursor of Panofsky’s broader (and better known) ‘principle of disjunction’ – the idea that classical iconography and classical style were separated from each other during the Middle Ages and only recombined in the Renaissance.49

Significantly, Panofsky first formulated this idea in the 1933 essay he wrote together with Saxl;50 it appears that his famous principle may have been developed in tandem with Saxl as well.

Despite the obvious influences from Warburg and similarities to Panofsky, however, Saxl’s approach to the problem of the Renaissance differs from that of either scholar in two important respects. Both Warburg and Panofsky had the panache to make broad statements on the basis of a minimum amount of relevant examples (something Saxl himself had attempted in his early theory on the representations of the planets). Saxl’s account of the history of constellation iconography, on the other hand, is based on the careful examination of a large corpus of material. Secondly, both Warburg and Panofsky sought the explanations for the art-historical mechanisms they described outside the field of art history itself, in different forms of what might be called cultural psychology. Saxl’s reconstruction of the transmission of constellation images, by contrast, is entirely based on the evidence provided by his material. The way in which he interpreted this evidence may have been guided by a preoccupation with the problem of how to define the Renaissance that he had inherited from Warburg, but the procedure by which he arrived at his conclusions and the nature of these conclusions were decidedly his own.

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47 Perhaps to be replaced only when Dieter Blume’s book on constellation images will appear. See Dieter Blume, Mechtilde Haffner, Wolfgang Metzger, Bild und Wissenschaft. Geschichte der Sternbilderdarstellungen in Mittelalter und Renaissance (800 - 1500), forthcoming.
49 Saxl, La fede negli astri, 35-40.
50 Saxl and Panofsky, ‘Classical Mythology in Mediaeval Art’, 263-78.
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