

## Aby Warburg, Images and Exhibitions

Review of:

Aby Warburg, *Bilderreihen und Ausstellungen* edited by Uwe Fleckner and Isabelle Woldt, Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2012. 470 pp. ISBN: 978-3-05-004268-8. 248 Euros

As Aby Warburg has become the object of increasing critical attention in the past 30 or so years, scholars have encountered a basic difficulty: the restricted availability of his writings. During his lifetime Warburg published only a small number of articles and essays, and plans to bring out his complete works in the 1930s stopped with the two-volume *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity*, which mostly consisted of material that had already appeared in the public domain, but with the addition of synopses of some of his lectures.<sup>1</sup> For Anglophone scholars the problem was even worse; aside from his lecture on the serpent ritual that was published in the *Journal of the Warburg Institute* in 1939, the only other writings that were available in English were those passages selected by Sir Ernst Gombrich for inclusion in his intellectual biography of Warburg of 1970.<sup>2</sup>

Since the mid-1990s the situation has dramatically changed. Not only did Nicholas Mann, director of the Warburg Institute, open up the Warburg Archive and encourage scholars to engage with its material, also, the Getty Research Institute funded a translation of *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity*, while a revised version of his serpent ritual lecture was also published in the United States.<sup>3</sup> As anyone familiar with the Warburg Archive in London will know, however, this represents only the tip of the iceberg. Indeed, Gombrich's biography, for all its limitations, performed an invaluable service in indicating the intellectual richness of Warburg's extensive unpublished oeuvre, from lecture drafts to notebooks and countless unfinished projects.

There have been attempts to bring some of this material to light, such as a German edition of his lecture on astrology dedicated to the memory of Franz Boll, or an Italian translation (with parallel German text) of Warburg's early notebooks 'Basic Fragments towards a monistic Psychology of Art'.<sup>4</sup> A

<sup>1</sup> Aby Warburg, *Die Erneuerung der heidnischen Antike*, Leipzig: B. G. Teubner, 1932.

<sup>2</sup> Aby Warburg, 'A Lecture on Serpent Ritual.' *Journal of the Warburg Institute*, 2, 1939, 277-92; Sir Ernst Gombrich, *Aby Warburg. An Intellectual Biography*, Oxford: Phaidon, 1970.

<sup>3</sup> Aby Warburg, *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity: Contributions to the Cultural History of the European Renaissance*, trans. David Britt, Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1999.

<sup>4</sup> Aby Warburg, *Frammenti sull'espressione*, ed., Susanne Müller, trans. Maurizio Gherlardi, Pisa: Scuola Superiore Normale, 2011; Warburg, *Per Monstra ad Sphaeram: Sternglaube und Bilddeutung. Vortrag in*

recent single-volume of Warburg's collected works included the contents of *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity* as well as various other essays and lectures from the archive, including the introduction to the *Mnemosyne* Atlas and his early text 'Symbolism as the Determination of Scope.'<sup>5</sup> By far the most ambitious project, however, has been the edition of the complete works of Warburg published by the Akademie Verlag in Berlin, of which this is the latest volume. Beginning with the re-publication of *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity* in 1998, the project, a collaboration between the Warburg Institute and the University of Hamburg, will include all the significant material in the Warburg Archive.

The current volume, which gathers together the various thematic sets and series of images Warburg compiled after his return to Hamburg from Kreuzlingen in 1925, is very much a companion to the *Mnemosyne* Atlas, already published as part of the edition in 1999.<sup>6</sup> Publication of the latter was already a welcome step, for although it had become the object of a considerable degree of interest, the Atlas remained elusive, its plates existing in several different versions in the Warburg Archive, successive commentaries offering only glimpses. The latest volume is not only significant in its right for making a new body of material available, it is also valuable in casting light on the *Mnemosyne*.

One of the key questions to do with the Atlas has been that of its status. While its format was novel, it was generally assumed to represent the culmination of Warburg's oeuvre, a synoptic presentation of the themes that had preoccupied him for the previous 35 to 40 years. Thus, familiar subjects reappear, such as the Palazzo Schifanoia frescoes, the Tempio Malatestiano, Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* and *Primavera*, astrological symbols, or the pathos formulae of Mantegna, Dürer and Rembrandt, confirming the sense that it was, in a certain sense, merely a restatement of his lifelong concerns. The fragmentary texts that were intended to accompany the Atlas only add to this interpretation, inasmuch as they frequently recycle concepts and terms that Warburg had first coined in the 1890s. However, a number of commentators, the most prominent among them Georges Didi-Huberman, have argued that it represented an important departure, crucial to which was the form of the atlas and its undermining of the epistemic assumptions of traditional art historical enquiry.<sup>7</sup>

This latest volume lends added force to Didi-Huberman's argument, for it reveals the extent to which the *Mnemosyne* Atlas was only one of many

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*Gedenken an Franz Boll und andere Schriften 1923 bis 1925*, ed., Claudia Wedepohl, Hamburg: Dölling and Gallitz, 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Sigrid Weigel, ed., *Aby Warburg. Werke in einem Band*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 2010.

<sup>6</sup> Aby Warburg, *Der Bilderatlas Mnemosyne*, ed. Martin Warnke, Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1999, 4<sup>th</sup> edition 2012.

<sup>7</sup> See Georges Didi-Huberman, *Atlas. How to Carry the World on One's Back?*, Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, 2011.

projects that explored the uses of the medium of visual display as a tool of intellectual inquiry. Uwe Fleckner notes in his masterful introductory essay to the volume that Warburg virtually gave up writing anything of substance after his return to Hamburg, primarily because he threw himself into the new project of composing pictorial essays. This is not entirely true; the Franz Boll lecture on 'The Influence of the Sphaera Barbarica on the Attempts of Christendom at Cosmic Orientation' is included in this volume, and it is a substantial piece of writing. Furthermore, most of the sequences of images were illustrations to talks he gave in the Warburg Library, and it was always his intention to write a lengthy textual commentary to accompany the *Mnemosyne* Atlas. Nevertheless, Fleckner is right to point out that Warburg clearly dedicated a considerable amount of intellectual energy to considering how best to employ images and visual montages as a communicative medium

This volume contains 13 separate projects, on topics ranging from astrology, to Manet, Domenico Ghirlandaio to stamps. It also includes the exhibition on the history of astrology that was housed in the water tower of the city park in Hamburg between 1930 and 1941 and which, although the work of Gertrud Bing and Fritz Saxl, was based on Warburg's collections of visual material. Some of the projects published here consist of photographic montages similar to those of the *Mnemosyne* Atlas, while in the case of others, such as the material for the lecture on 'Orientalising Astrology,' all that remain are Warburg's sketches for the layout of planned plates that did not ever come to fruition.

Didi-Huberman's reinterpretation of the *Mnemosyne* Atlas emphasised that Warburg's project was distinct from the atlases of art history that had proliferated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Whereas the latter were concerned primarily with using the atlas form as an instrument of taxonomic ordering, in which individual works functioned as metonymic representatives of styles or schools, the material in *Mnemosyne*, Didi-Huberman argued, worked across such traditional forms of categorisation, combining images from spatially and temporally distant locations that provided a corrective to the notion that the history of art could be grasped as a neat process of linear evolution. Although their intellectual origins are quite different, the similarity between Warburg's montages and the practices of the photographic avant-garde of the 1920s were consequently more than one of mere superficial visual resemblance. Both were concerned with achieving a profound epistemological reorientation.

The materials in this volume bear out Didi-Huberman's claim to some degree, but they also indicate that Warburg had not entirely decided what direction he was taking. The plates of stamps put together for his 1927 lecture on 'The Function of Images on Stamps in Dissemination of Ideas across the World', for example, reveal that Warburg had no respect for disciplinary

boundaries, and regarded apparently trivial subject matter as being equally deserving of scrutiny. Indeed, this continued his interest in the reproduced image that had been the hallmark of his 1918 essay on prophecy in astrology in the German Reformation. Yet the ordering of the material betrays the art historian's concern for taxonomy; rows of stamps portraying rulers and political leaders, for instance, or national *lieux de mémoire* (not Warburg's term) or the recurring figure of the *nymphe*, are neatly regimented as in an album. The philatelist's tendency to arrange the stamps according to their national political origin is ignored, but in all other respects there is little here to suggest the epistemic reversals claimed on his behalf by Didi-Huberman. On the other hand, some of his works, in particular, those on astrology, make some startling juxtapositions. One of the plates for the lecture on 'Anthropomorphism in the Heavens' (September 1927), for example, includes images of the constellations of the Torres Straits Islanders and the Uali of Brazil, as well as visual motifs from the pre-Columbian divinatory Codex Borgia, photographs of the Temple of Heaven in Beijing, as well as the zodiac of an unidentified Chinese calendar. We do not have the text that would have accompanied these diverse images, but one can imagine what it might have been, and this global transhistorical and transcultural exploration, which was clearly more than the merely positivist documentation of the migration of visual symbols and ideas from one culture to another, went far beyond contemporary parameters of inquiry into visual sources and meanings.

The volume is a masterpiece of editorial detective work. As with the earlier *Mnemosyne Atlas*, the editorial team has carefully tracked down the details of every image included on the plates. This is invaluable, for it will enable interpretations that go beyond most commentaries on this material which, until now, have focused on the general format of Warburg's plates without offering close readings of individual examples. On the other hand, it raises questions about procedure. As Fleckner himself concedes, much of what we find in this volume is the result of considerable editorial intervention, in which order has been given to a disparate array of visual and textual sources in a manner that reflects the interests of early twentieth-century scholars. The claim that Warburg was attempting a radical rethinking of art historical representation relies on a body of material that he never viewed as resolved. There is thus a danger in treating the various works in this volume as indicative of a significant departure in art historical method, when Warburg had clearly not decided on the destination. Yet that is exactly what Didi-Huberman (and even Fleckner) does, when in fact we are presented with a series of experiments, their varying approaches to the presentation of visual material suggesting that Warburg was still uncertain as to the method and implications of his new pictorial theory of the image.

This volume has a magnificent critical apparatus, and the astonishing amount of labour involved makes the frustratingly slow pace at which the volumes of the *Akademie* edition of Warburg entirely understandable. However, it is regrettable that it should come at such a price. In his history of the Weimar Republic Peter Gay identified Warburg as one of the leading intellectuals of interwar Germany, alongside such others as Walter Benjamin, Siegfried Kracauer, Ernst Cassirer or Martin Heidegger.<sup>8</sup> The works of these and other authors are all available in affordable editions, which means that they continue to be read by researchers. Warburg, on the other hand, has not been served well by publishers, for he continues to be inaccessible, although this time it is a matter of economics. At 248 euros for this volume alone, one wonders even which libraries will purchase the collected writings; add to this the cost of the other three volumes that have already appeared (99.80 euros each), and it is certainly clear, given that so many more are still to be published before the edition is complete, that few individuals will be able to afford this publication. Such a pricing strategy ensures that for all the significance of his intellectual project, Warburg will continue to remain, for many, a marginal, little-read figure, admired from a distance but playing a limited role in the detailed analysis of the intellectual life of early twentieth century Europe.

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<sup>8</sup> Peter Gay, *Weimar Culture. The Outsider as Insider* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970).