

Richard Woodfield on Uwe Fleckner and Peter Mack, *The Afterlife of the Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek Warburg*

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Review of: Uwe Fleckner and Peter Mack, *The Afterlife of the Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek Warburg: Volume 12 (Vorträge aus dem Warburg-Haus)*, Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter 2015, 250 pp., 52 ill. b/w, £29.99, ISBN-10: 3110438305, ISBN-13: 978-3110438307.

This review was rejected for publication by caa.reviews on the grounds that its word length (2020 words) exceeded the allowable (1500 words). Rather than consign it to the bin, I am releasing it into the ether. [RW – ed.]

[Corrected 8.09.2016, with thanks to Riccardo Marchi (University of South Florida) for pointing out my error in writing that Clark attended the Schifanoia lecture (1912, finally published in 1922). Gombrich dates the lecture Clark attended at the Heriziana in Rome at 19 January 1929 (Intellectual Biography, 1970 p. 271). Clark gives the date as 1927. It would be interesting to explore Clark's recollections of his encounter in his papers at the Tate Archives.]

This volume celebrates the eightieth anniversary of the Warburg Library's transportation from its home in Hamburg to London. After a charming opening preface by Uwe Fleckner, Isabella Woldt illuminates the family politics surrounding its move to London in the context of the Great Depression. It offers a useful supplement to Fritz Saxl's well-known account. Hannah Vorholt follows with a commentary on, and translation of, Gertrud Bing's letter to Hanns Swarzenski in which she offers her personal view on the relation between being Jewish and German and its implications for the future of her mental life as an emigrant. Elizabeth McGrath illuminates the role of the *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* in presenting an Anglophone front for the new institute's activities. Michael Kauffmann offers a brief reminiscence of "Oxford and the Warburg Institute in the early fifties". Jennifer Montague explains how, in its days before the move to its new Bloomsbury headquarters, it functioned as "a family not an Institute" (quoting Margaret Whinney). She also describes her experience of working at its photographic collection. Sydney Anglo reflects on the move from the Imperial Institute in South Kensington to "Bloomsbury and Beyond", subtitled "The Intellectual Life of the Early Warburg Institute". Elizabeth Sears describes the work on an early English admirer and collaborator, Roger Hinks, who reviewed Fritz Saxl's collected lectures for the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1958. Dorothea McEwan offers an exposition of Fritz Saxl's thoughts on the aim of writing history. Margaret M. McGowan writes on the use that Frances Yates made of the Warburg library. Pablo Schneider reviews the life and work of Edgar Wind. The following three essays focus on Ernst Gombrich: Claudia Wedepohl on his Warburg biography, Alex Potts on his "translation of the German tradition of Critical Art History" and John Onians on "the Warburg's impact on Britain and Britain's impact on the Warburg". Arnold Nesselrath concludes with an account of the project on "The census of antique works of art and

architecture known in the Renaissance". This is altogether an extraordinarily rich collection of memorabilia and analysis that complements the earlier publication, in *General Knowledge* (18.1 Winter 2012), of *The Warburg Institute: A Special Issue on the Library and Its Readers* ed. Anthony Grafton and Jeffrey E. Hamburger.

It would have been helpful to know what the British had made of the work of Aby Warburg and his library/institute before its arrival in London. We do know that Kenneth Clark had attended a lecture given by Warburg in Rome in 1927: "Instead of thinking of works of art as life-enhancing representations he thought of them as symbols, and he believed that the art historian should concern himself with the origin, meaning and transmission of symbolic images." (*Another Part of the Wood*, 1974, p. 189) Others connected the Warburg project with astrology. Nonetheless when it moved to London it was staffed by a small but impressive array of German-speaking art historians and rapidly became a centre for the dissemination of their expertise.

Sears' work on the Warburg Archives deserves to be particularly encouraged. The Warburg and Courtauld Institutes are generally treated in separation but this needs to be revisited. The people behind its move included those behind the formation of the Courtauld. How did they see the relationship between the work of the two institutions? Saxl only changed the journal's name to include the Courtauld two years after its initial publication. As late as 1970 Gombrich complained to me that that its staff made little contribution to it. However, in 1952 Pevsner argued that there was no need to establish art history as a study in Oxford and Cambridge as it was "sufficiently well looked after by the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes." ("An Un-English Activity? – I: Reflections on Not Teaching Art History", *The Listener*, October 30, 1952, p. 716) Staff from the Warburg did give visiting lectures at their sister institute but why were they not simply merged? It is noteworthy that Gombrich published his wartime articles, on Poussin and Reynolds, in *The Burlington Magazine* and then his Warburgian articles, "*Icones Symbolicae*" and "Botticelli's Mythologies" in the *JWCI*. Were there two cultural spheres at work? How did the Warburg family fit in? In 1977 Clark complained: "sometimes the Warburgian approach seems to obsess him [Gombrich], and is worked out in such great detail that we begin to grow a little impatient." He felt that the business of the art historian should be "to give the reader some idea of why great artists are great". ('Stories of Art', *New York Review of Books*, 24 (19), November 24, 1977)

Certainly external economic constraints and internal political conflicts had a major impact on the physical existence of Aby Warburg's creation. The rise of Nazism was a necessary but not sufficient cause of its move to London, as Isabella Woldt demonstrates. However, writing in December 2013, she was too sanguine about its future as an institute within the University of London. Its existence as a carefully constructed research environment was under an organisational threat that was only resolved on November 6th 2014 through a High Court judgment, after ten days of legal argument. (For a full account of the affair see Charles Hope, "On Saving the Warburg." *London Review of Books* 36 no. 23 (2014): 32-34.) Does contemporary English academia, with its penchant for 'art in context' and 'arts and ideas' actually understand the rationale of the unique organisation of the library as a '*machine à penser*' (Ginzburg 2012, p. 85)? Saxl was averse to the very idea of the Institute being connected to London University and

had to be persuaded around to acceptance. How else did he think that it might have maintained its existence? How did the German paradigm for independent research institutes match against the situation in England?

The letter from Gertrud Bing to Hanns Swarzenski is a fascinating human document and it raises the question of the perception of the London Warburg as a Jewish institution. Erwin Panofsky wrote to Margaret Barr: "the whole thing is filled with what I should like to call an Emigrant's or Refugiée's atmosphere (the readers consisting almost exclusively of German and Hungarian jews)". (Erwin Panofsky: *Korrespondenz 1910 bis 1968. Eine kommentierte Auswahl in fünf Bänden. Herausgegeben von Dieter Wuttke*, Band 1, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2001, p. 737) Was this a perception shared by the British academic establishment, and did it matter? Given that there was an element of anti-semitism amongst the Establishment, the support of influential private figures must have been very important. This would bear further examination.

Clearly Saxl's diplomatic activities in creating a support network for the KBW was important for the development of art history as a field of study. The problem is that UK academia is not, and has never been, a natural home for *Kunstgeschichte*, even less for *Kulturwissenschaft* and *Kulturgeschichte*; certainly not in the forms envisaged by Aby Warburg. Saxl had to draw upon the library's material resources to make it acceptable to an Anglophone audience. He did this by creating photographic exhibitions, providing art historical expertise to a growing body of interested scholars and turning the *Journal of the Warburg Institute* into the *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*. It is both interesting and significant that the current history of the Courtauld declares: "For the Warburg, the arts were inextricably bound up with the thought world of their time, and art history entailed research into the past, often of a rarefied academic order, in which the clear-cut distinction between history and art history ceased to exist. It was an approach that called for a formidable array of intellectual talents, and there was no great rush of British converts to this outpost of Mitteleuropa." (<http://courtauld.ac.uk/about/history>)

Perhaps the most important publication to emerge from the environs of the Warburg was Ernst Gombrich's *The Story of Art*, which appeared in time for Christmas 1949 with a reproduction of Titian's 'naughty' *Nymph and Shepherd* (Vienna Kunstmuseum) as an unlisted plate. The book was produced in spite of Saxl's discouragement and was to become the most important British recruiting agent to the cause of art history. Following that publication Tom Boase, who had been Director of the Courtauld Institute and had now become President of Magdalene College, had Gombrich invited to become Oxford Slade Professor. Again it is significant that Boase had been a target of complaints from the English art community, for his disconnection from the 'set' and his not being an 'art historian'. Gombrich, himself, became a target. In 1987 Cecil Gould asked: "Has he [Gombrich] ever actually *established* anything that was not known before? I ask the question honestly and perhaps in ignorance." Charles Hope wrote in his obituary (*Independent*, Monday, November 5, 2010): "He showed relatively little interest in the more traditional aspects of art history, the investigation of who made what, or when, and his touch was at its weakest when he tried to deal with specific problems associated with such issues." But did these critics ever really understand what his concerns were as a student of art history? Like Saxl, Gombrich had been trained in Vienna but unlike Saxl, or Johannes Wilde at the

Courtauld, he continued to be preoccupied by the concerns of the Vienna School, engaging in a fundamental battle with the methodological issues of German art history throughout his life. Those battles did not, and probably still do not, make much sense to the English. As recently as 2009, the Courtauld art historian Paul Crossley contrasted “Franco-German readers, for whom ... *Rezeptionsgeschichte* now seems an almost mandatory introduction to any study, [with] English-speaking readers [who] will find these sections long, gritty and not obviously relevant to the argument.” (*Burlington Magazine* Vol. 151, Nov., 2009, 771). Ironically, when the ‘new’ art historians did battle with the establishment they picked on Gombrich as a representative. Norman Bryson, who had faulted Gombrich for a non-semiotic approach to pictorial representation, had failed to notice his concern with the “problems of the semantics of the image as applied to pictorial art” (*Warburg Institute Annual Report 1946-7*). It started in Schlosser’s class with *Kunstsprache*, was first clearly articulated in his review of Charles Morris’s *Signs, Language and Behavior* (*Art Bulletin* 1949) and surfaced in his use of Karl Bühler’s *Sprachtheorie* in the first chapter of *Art and Illusion*. Proponents of New Art History, in their parochialism, failed to make the connection.

What of *Kulturgeschichte*? Hegel and *Kultur* had never become mapped on to English academia, except as an isolated cause amongst philosophers, and English students of the humanities have never been great at taking philosophy seriously. The Warburg became important for students and scholars who wanted to pursue offbeat disciplinary topics and so the story continues. Frances Yates pragmatically suggested that researchers at the Warburg should simply follow their nose for where their problems took them and if that required plunging into unknown territory, so be it. Gombrich advanced the cause of ‘cupology’. Many different questions could be addressed at a teacup and varying directions of interest could take the investigator into economics, technology, chemistry, cultural geography etc. In his own case, he pursued his investigations into the psychology of perception at the library of the British Psychological Society in Senate House as he found little of value in the Warburg Library itself. However, the fact remains that the library is unique in its invitation to explore and stumble upon material that one would not find in a collection of art historical books. And, as Gombrich argued, art history is not really so much a discipline as a subject area that is defined by its objects and the interests that scholars might have in them.

Reading the book has left one final *desideratum*. The Warburg Institute should consider publishing on its website a complete set of its Annual Reports, which contains lists of its visitors and projects. Many scholars have walked through its doors, talked to its staff and used its resources. It would be very interesting to know who they were and what they went on to publish. As the Library’s catalogue is available online it would make an invaluable supplement.

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