

Out of the shadows? Discovering Mary Warburg

Review of:

Hedinger, Bärbel; Diers, Michael (Eds.): *Mary Warburg. Porträt einer Künstlerin. Leben, Werk*, München: Hirmer Verlag 2020
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Mary Warburg, née Hertz: only a few scholars will be familiar with the name of this sculptor and illustrator.¹ Even the most renowned specialists for German art in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century have probably never seen a work by Warburg. Her work is not represented in any public collection, with the exception of a few works in the Kunsthalle Hamburg. Warburg's oeuvre remained almost entirely in the possession of her family.

And yet, Warburg is the subject of a comprehensive and lavishly produced catalogue raisonné, edited by art historians Michael Diers and Bärbel Hedinger. The publication is a truly splendid tome of 536 pages and 900 illustrations, printed in colour throughout. This is indeed a significant effort considering that we are dealing here with a 'little known artist', as the dust jacket concedes. For comparison: the catalogue raisonné of the paintings of Wilhelm Schadow – director of the Düsseldorf academy and one of the most influential artists of his day – only amounts to a moderate 368 pages with 400 illustrations.

Mary Warburg is perhaps best known among students of art historiography – which has to do mainly with her marital status, and little with her own artistic achievements. She was the wife of Aby Warburg, the famous historian of art and culture whose significance for recent methodological debates in the field needs no further comment. Mary Warburg's best-known work is thus also, tellingly, a portrait bust of her husband, which is displayed prominently in the Warburg Institute in London and the Warburg Haus Hamburg, as well as illustrated in numerous publications on Aby – often without even naming the maker. While Aby looms large, and has become a constant point of reference in methodological debates within art history, his wife and her life are – as the editors rightly highlight – almost fully eclipsed by his legacy. The editors are no exception in that respect: one of them, Michael Diers, is widely acknowledged as a leading expert on the work of *Aby* Warburg – but his publications suggest little prior investment in themes such as bourgeois art in Imperial Germany or female artists. Or, to put it differently: had Mary Warburg not been married to Aby, it is extremely likely that nobody would have bothered cataloguing her oeuvre.

¹ This is a slightly expanded version of a review first published in German: Hans Christian Hönes: [Review of:] Hedinger, Bärbel; Diers, Michael (Hrsg.): *Mary Warburg. Porträt einer Künstlerin. Leben, Werk*, München 2020. In: ArtHist.net, Apr 18, 2021 (accessed Jun 10, 2021), <https://arthist.net/reviews/33788>.

Diers and Hedinger nevertheless endeavour to let Mary Warburg re-appear from behind her husband's larger-than-life persona. Countering the oft-repeated cliché that Mary Warburg was a 'mere' dilettante, the editors aim to rediscover her as an independent and ambitious artist, who clearly strove to make art her profession. The catalogue documents an interesting and varied oeuvre that constitutes a fascinating example of bourgeois artistic tastes in Germany, between Empire and Weimar Republic. The catalogue is complemented by several extensive essays that contextualise Warburg's work in depth: an introductory essay by the editors reconstructs her life and work in admirable nuance and detail. Two essays by Andrea Völker embed her oeuvre in the context of the Hamburg art world. Other contributions discuss, for example, the history of the Hertz family (Jutta Braden), and Aby and Mary Warburg's (rare) purchases of modern art (Michael Diers and Martin Warnke). Scholars of art historiography will benefit in particular from Steffen Haug's lucid essay, highlighting Mary Warburg's contributions to her husband's scholarship. Throughout Aby Warburg's career, his wife supported him by drawing sketches after artworks. Repeatedly these sketches were intended to help her husband to structure his thoughts, for example by abstracting artworks into compositional schemes, or by simplifying and clarifying complex materials such as the fresco programme of the Palazzo Schifanoia, subject of Aby's famous 1912 lecture at the International Congress for Art History in Rome (pp. 126-133). Taken together, the contributions map a dense and nuanced picture of the Hamburg artworld of the time. More importantly, they present an excellent account of bourgeois life and taste of the period – and the tensions and frequently frustrating limitations that this social background meant for the ambitions of a young aspiring female artist.

Mary Hertz was the daughter of a renowned and wealthy Hamburg family. Her father was a member of the city's senate, and he seems to have encouraged his daughter's interest in art from an early age. Already as a teenager, Mary Hertz enrolled into private art schools that catered predominantly for the artistic education of young women. She received her most sustained spell of education in the studio of the painter Friedrich Wilhelm Schlinge, where she trained predominantly as a landscape painter. During the 1880s, she travelled extensively through Germany and Europe – always accompanied by her father. The results of these travels are chiefly documented in a series of sketchbooks. Hertz's landscape drawings from these years demonstrate her skill and precision (pp. 168-191), though it is probably fair to characterise her works of the period as rather conventional. In the introductory essay, the editors aptly characterise her style as 'realist' with 'certain picturesque leanings' (p. 18). This seems to stand in a marked and perhaps surprising contrast to her personal tastes: Mary Hertz was clearly a supporter of recent Secessionist movements, and applauded their unconventional aesthetic.

During the 1890s, Hertz turned more and more to sculpture as her preferred medium. The works from this period are undoubtedly the most interesting part of her oeuvre. The genesis of many works from these years is documented in detail through her private correspondence, clearly demonstrating her sustained commitment to her art. In particular, she created a range of female figurines, situated somewhere between Arnold Böcklin (whom she studied intensely) and a measured art nouveau. Among the most remarkable works are a dynamic statuette

of a kneeling Joan of Arc (p. 442), and a surprisingly lascivious female nude, draped over a shell (p. 444-45). While her nude drawings frequently appear a bit schematic and stiff (e.g. pp. 272-281, 449 ('statuette of a boy')), this translates into an elegantly flowing, decorative style in the sculptural medium.

Early on, Mary Hertz established important personal and professional networks, in particular with other female artists such as the painter Wilhelmine Niels. At the same time – facilitated by her patrician family background – she had easy access to all important protagonists of the Hamburg art world. These contacts soon led, from of the 1890s, to public recognition and some commissions, in particular for book illustrations. In 1892, she published a number of illustrations for the 'Hamburger Weihnachtsalbum', a charitable project, intended to support the victims of a recent Cholera epidemic that had devastated Hamburg (pp. 428-31). In the following years, she designed posters for the exhibitions of the 'Hamburger Kunstfreunde' society, and published illustrations in the magazine *PAN*.

These works show a talented young artist, who had a great ability to work across a number of media. It is easy to imagine that, in another life, Mary Hertz would have carved out a productive and successful career for herself and become an established artist and illustrator. But the expectations for a woman of her social background, combined with a very strict protestant upbringing, led her life down a different path. In her younger years, there were the 'duties of a daughter' ('*Tochterpflichten*') that are mentioned repeatedly in her letters and diaries. For many years, Mary cared selflessly for her chronically ill mother – a commitment that left comparatively little time for her professional ambitions. In this light, even the regular travels with her father appear more like relief granted to a carer than an opportunity for artistic development. In 1897, Mary married Aby Warburg, after a decade-long engagement. Aby's parents were observant Jews and strictly opposed to their oldest son's marriage to a gentile – the ceremony eventually took place without the groom's next of kin being present. Together, the couple moved to Florence, and Tuscany seemed at first a promised land for Mary. Her works of these years demonstrate her keen interest in the same Quattrocento masters that her husband studied. Florence also allowed her to get acquainted with revered contemporary artists such as Arnold Böcklin. But soon married life settled in a domestic routine that proved to be little different to what she had known back home in Hamburg. New duties took the place of old ones, and as wife and – from of 1899 – mother she had perhaps even less freedom and space for her artistic practice.

The catalogue highlights this clearly: between 1900 and c. 1918, Mary Warburg's artistic production virtually ground to a halt. In these decades, she produced only very few drawings, of mostly domestic and private themes such as portrait drawings of her children. In these years she was, as the editors rightly highlight, 'a sort of family artist', whose skills were only in demand when little gifts and souvenirs for Christmas or anniversaries were needed. At this point in time, Warburg clearly had given up on her earlier ambitions to retain a public profile as an artist, in any genre.

Only from of the years during and after the First World War – the children were now teenagers, the husband sectioned in various mental asylums – did Mary Warburg regain more space for her artistic activities. She mainly returned to her interest in landscape painting and produced numerous pastel paintings that very

much follow the style of the artists' colony in Worpswede. Mary Warburg was indeed a keen visitor to this community, close to her hometown (pp. 380-384). This return to art, after many years of sole devotion to the duties of wife and mother, was clearly not an easy process. Around 1915, Mary Warburg mentions that she 'finds courage to work independently' (p. 61). At the same time, however, she was always clear that realizing such ambitions would depend on her husband's permission to proceed. But Aby Warburg was anything but encouraging. As a husband, he evidently was volatile and harsh, and always intent on emphasising traditional hierarchies between the sexes. When Mary, in autumn 1915, carefully asked for permission to spend more time on her art, she was fiercely rebutted. Aby responded with an angry letter, accusing her of abandoning and neglecting the education of their children (p. 62).

This was not the first time this had happened; Aby Warburg had clear ideas about a woman's place. When, in 1904, Mary accepted the request to design a poster for a champagne producer (a gesture of friendship, without the prospect of payment) he told her off in no uncertain terms.² For Mary, this must have made for a striking contrast to the man she thought she knew during their long period of courting and engagement. The correspondence of the early years seems to suggest that both partners pictured a modern, enlightened, and equal relationship for themselves. For almost ten years, both addressed each other as 'comrades'.³ Warburg and Mary Hertz clearly subscribed to the ideal of *Gefährtenehe* – of marriage as companionship where both partners remain intellectually and professionally supportive but independent and equal. In Warburg's own time, Max and Marianne Weber became the much-feted symbol for this marriage of equals.⁴ During Max Weber's tenure at Heidelberg University, his wife (with whom he maintained little if any sexual relations) not only gained a prolific status in the more traditional female domain of *salonnière*, she also became an academic in her own right. Initially, Aby Warburg similarly seemed to delight in his wife's understanding of art, and both discoursed on an advanced level about aesthetics – but this was clearly short-lived.⁵

The introductory essay by Diers and Hedinger succeeds impressively in outlining the pressures and limitations of bourgeois life around 1900, without apportioning blame or accusations on either side. The sources speak for themselves anyway, and the rich appendix of personal documents such as letters and diaries – impeccably edited – make for a sobering read. Already in the 1890s, the young artist reflects about her self-doubt and inner torment. On the one hand, she clearly articulates her 'great wish to achieve something decent with my art' (p. 481). On the

² Warburg Institute Archive, Family Correspondence. Aby Warburg to Mary Warburg, 01/07/1904.

³ E.g. Warburg Institute Archive, Family Correspondence. Mary Hertz to Aby Warburg, 18/05/1889.

⁴ Tilman Allert, 'Max und Marianne Weber: Die Gefährtenehe', in *Heidelberg im Schnittpunkt intellektueller Kreise*, ed. Hubert Treiber and Karol Sauerland, Opladen: Westdt. Verlag, 1995, 210-241.

⁵ See Aby Warburg, *Fragmente zur Ausdruckskunde* (Gesammelte Schriften vol. IV), ed. Ulrich Pfisterer and Hans Christian Hönes, Berlin/Boston: de Gruyter, 2015, 60-62.

other hand she clearly deemed such wishes to be exceedingly selfish and vain, implying a neglect of her real duties towards her parents: 'Once again, my head is full of my paintings, and it makes me realise immediately how much harder it becomes to think of others' (p. 483). Her sense of duty for her 'poor little mother' frequently got the better of her, but Mary Warburg always remained torn between two divergent priorities. By 1915, she admitted to an overwhelming feeling of 'insufficiency and worthlessness' (p. 61). At this point, her hopes to live for art and to find professional fulfilment were only a distant memory. In 1934, in his eulogy for his sister, Wilhelm Gossler Hertz summarised this tragic conflict between inner vocation and societal limitations: 'It is moot to ask whether, as a wife, she could have been able to lead an independent life as an artist'. She tried – 'but she didn't find the right balance that had to be found to retain the required decorum, and this aroused the wrath and intervention of her husband, under which she suffered greatly, without being able to draw consequences from it' (p. 518).

Mary Warburg's fate is probably representative for the biographies of countless other ambitious women, in art or other professions whose achievements are all but forgotten today. For the editors, this is however not only to be blamed on her life circumstances, but also on recent art historiography. Over almost ten pages (pp. 78-87) the editors fire their attacks against numerous authors such as Bernd Roeck (who is deemed guilty of a reactionary view of women and defamation of character), Joist Grolle ('worth reading' but 'trivial') or Gertrud Bing (who is suspected of 'almost maligning' Mary Warburg). Like many others, these authors are accused of (perhaps maliciously) marginalising Mary Warburg's oeuvre. Anybody who doubts Mary Warburg's professional ambitions, or even the quality of her work, is thus singled out for fierce criticism. Rhetorical questions ('How on earth?'; 'Why does this happen?') express the editors' disbelief about the 'carelessness and lack of respect' with which Mary Warburg has allegedly been dismissed. Anybody who might disagree with this verdict is guilty of 'narrow-mindedness or ignorance'. Here, the editors clearly and repeatedly overshoot the mark, and it is doubtful whether such outbursts will help Mary Warburg's cause.

This is not to doubt the book's main hypothesis: Mary Warburg *was* an artist, and more than a mere dilettante; in her younger years, she clearly pursued professional ambitions. But the editors often seem to overstep the line between legitimate re-evaluation of their subject, and a latently uncritical heroization. Even lost artworks are praised with epithets such as 'artistically complex' (p. 28). The very format of a catalogue raisonné – especially when presented in such a lavish format – only adds to this impression. On the one hand, the editors demand a more 'unbiased assessment of the life and work of this artist' – while claiming on the other hand that every 'hesitant verdict on Mary's artistry' is indicative of 'outdated patriarchal patterns of thoughts' (pp. 86-7).

This raises, once again, the old question of whether a monograph (or catalogue raisonné) is indeed the best genre for assessing and promoting female artistic production – or whether this just proliferates old patterns of canonisation of 'great' artists. Feminist art historians in particular have repeatedly critiqued the implications of such a monographic approach, and argued for an art history that accepts 'minor figures' just as such – instead of heroizing them into monographic subjects. Such an approach would also seek to actively integrate moments of failure

and social marginalisation into the analysis – instead of solely fighting old, entrenched battles about questions of ‘art’ versus ‘non-art’.⁶

To this end, many literary scholars have proposed to reassess the category of the ‘middlebrow’.⁷ Art history so far has shown relatively little interest in these debates.⁸ While ‘visual culture studies’ have opened the discipline to the realm of ‘lowbrow’ imagery, from technical illustrations over advertisements to pornography, much less attention has been paid to artworks of the second, third, or fourth tier (i.e., the thousands of works that can be situated somewhere between ‘lowbrow’ and the ‘highbrow’ histories of masterpieces). Publications on artists such as Mary Warburg remain an exception. The most interesting attempts to tackle this imbalance comes perhaps from the realm of the *digital humanities*. In recent years, scholars have increasingly experimented with quantitative methods and the analysis of larger datasets. Such a statistical re-evaluation of nineteenth-century art might also lead to a re-assessment of the historical place of female artists, without focusing solely on detached case studies.⁹

To achieve just that, scholars also need to think carefully about the best ways for presenting their material. Many institutions, such as the Paul Mellon Centre, have already abandoned the old format of printed catalogues raisonnés, in favour of the accessibility and usability provided by digital formats. This might not produce a handsome ‘monument of scholarship’, to be displayed on a bookshelf or in institutional vitrines – but it might advance the cause of such cataloguing projects much more efficiently. This, however, should not stop us enjoying this splendid catalogue raisonné and delight in the wealth of new resources that it presents to scholarship in a truly lavish way.

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⁶ Jo Applin, *Lee Lozano. Not working*, London/New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2018.

⁷ Diana Holmes, *Middlebrow Matters*, Liverpool: Liverpool Univ. Press, 2018.

⁸ Hana Leaper, ‘Opinion: Middlebrow Art’, *Tate etc.* 42 (2018).

⁹ Diana Seave Greenwald, *Painting by Numbers*, Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2021.