

Aby Warburg and the Boundaries of Art History

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Aby Warburg was one of the earliest historians of art to seek an interdisciplinary approach to art, as seen in the breadth of his research on cultural forms, collective memory, and the intertwining of symbolism between cultures. To express this vision, he needed to break out of conventional scholarly formats.

According to Giorgio Agamben, Warburg could never have found in the personality of the artist the deeper content of the image. The symbols did not serve to reconstruct a personality, they were the ideal space to overcome the opposition between history and anthropology¹

The paradigmatic expression of his view of art was the basis of the organization of his library in Hamburg, designed to erode the limits of the disciplinary specialization of fragmented knowledge, reflecting his inclusive notion of culture as opposed to the history of autonomous art. In the library was installed the Mnemosyne Atlas, a nondiscursive and nonlinear composition of images of various types and origins, continuously modified.

In its last version the Atlas was a room-sized display system involving forty panels stretched with black cloth to which Warburg attached something like a thousand photographs of Renaissance paintings, ancient sculpted reliefs, illuminated manuscript pages, maps, modern news photos, and advertisements. By pinning them to panels, Warburg declined to submit the images to hierarchies, but rather allowed them to pulse in all directions at once.

Didi Huberman, one of his most interesting contemporary interpreters, draws attention to Warburg's trip to New Mexico in 1895, when Warburg began to feel aversion to aestheticized art history and for the merely formal consideration of the image, thinking that it would merely engender a sterile wordplay. It was on this occasion that Warburg realized that there was a connection between the art and religion of the primitive peoples

and that this connection remained in other epochs, which led him to emphasize it as fundamental in the culture of the early Florentine Renaissance.

Anthropology helped to illuminate the question of style. This implies a move from art history (*Kunstgeschichte*) to a science of culture (*Kulturwissenschaft*). For Warburg, the image constituted a "total anthropological phenomenon," a particularly significant crystallization and condensation of what was culture at one point in its history.

To this extent, the Atlas Mnemosyne project was the perfect strategy to use for turning to the problem of style, always combining the study of the singular case with the anthropological approach of the relations that made these singularities operative in historical and cultural terms. In the Mnemosyne Atlas model there is no contradiction in studying the pathetic formulas of Renaissance (*Pathosformeln*) as a survival (*Nachleben*) of visual formulas of classical antiquity, for example.

The survival evoked by Warburg is a concept that has its origins in Anglo-Saxon anthropology and, according to Didi Huberman, Warburg borrowed it from the great British ethnologist Edward B. Tylor. For Didi-Huberman, both Warburg and Tylor sought to overcome the eternal contraposition between the evolutionary model, which we generally associate with history, and a kind of atemporality, which we usually attribute to anthropology. Tylor believed that the development of culture could not be reduced to a law of evolution analogous to the laws of the natural sciences, having identified in primitive cultures what he called "ghostly time," that is, the idea that in the present we find a kind of interweaving among multiple pasts. In Warburg's case, survivals led art history to open up to anthropological problems such as superstition, the transmission of beliefs, myths, and astrology, among others.

According to Agambem, the point of view from which Warburg considered human phenomena undoubtedly coincides with that of anthropology, and the less unfaithful way of characterizing his "unnamed science" would perhaps be to insert it into the project of a future "anthropology" of culture in which philology, ethnology, history, and biology would converge.

Despite contemporary interest in the montage process applied by Warburg in the Mnemosyne Atlas and the fact that his approach abolishes disciplinary barriers, his investigative attitude is criticized for falling into some vices that may affect ethnography and anthropology, that is, by placing the ethnographer in a transcendent position, explaining its subject according to its own categories of signification, and reproducing the position of the colonizer vis-à-vis the colonized, or of the developed in relation to the primitive.

Opening a discussion of Warburg's study of the Hopi ritual, Claire Farago suggests that rhetorical strategies continued to be replicated in anthropologic practices. Warburg's photographs for this study illustrate this phenomenon, such as photography of Warburg pretending to be a cowboy and posing with a Hopi dancer who, even though wearing authentic ceremonial attire and body painting, fictionalizes his identity to most observers (Fig. 1). The ethnographic framework is produced visually in terms of conventions of pose, framing, and costumes. Even though Warburg may be being ironic, this does not free him from earlier colonial ideology. According to Farago, Warburg's irony was intentional, and he undoubtedly defined the boundaries of a new field of study. But an additional metacritical effect, probably unintentional, reiterates the initial colonial framework.²



1 Aby Warburg with an unidentified Hopi dancer, Arizona, May, 1896 (photograph: Warburg Institute Archive, London)

Notes

¹ Giorgio Agamben, "Aby Warburg and the Nameless Science," in *Potentialities: Collected Essays on Philosophy*, by Giorgio Agamben and Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).

² Claire J. Farago, " Silent Moves: Locating the Ethnographic Subject in the Discourse of Art History," in *Transforming Images: New Mexican Santos in-between Worlds*, ed. Claire J. Farago and Donna Pierce (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006).