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Carol Gibson-Wood

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Raymond Klibansky and the Warburg Institute

CAROL GIBSON-WOOD, UNIVERSITY OF VICTORIA

When I began my doctoral studies at the Warburg Institute in London in 1975, I knew very little about the research institute where I had been accepted, apart from two decisive factors: namely, that several of the art historians whose work I most admired were, or had been, affiliated with the Warburg, and that I would be able to combine my background interests and training in both Philosophy and Art History. During the course of my studies there, under the supervision of Sir Ernst Gombrich (briefly, before his retirement) and then Michael Baxandall, I began to recognize just how fortunate I was to be based at that remarkable centre, and in subsequent years I have come to realize the enormous impact it exerted on my intellectual values, approach to research, and academic career. I am therefore greatly honoured today to be able to pay tribute to Professor Raymond Klibansky, whose activities and foresight in the 1930s contributed directly to both the intellectual and institutional identity of the Warburg Institute.

The Warburg Institute originated in the personal library of the Hamburg art historian Aby Warburg (1866–1929), whose research focused primarily on the roles played in Italian Renaissance civilization by the imagery of classical antiquity.¹ In 1921, under the guidance of Warburg's assistant, Fritz Saxl, the library was transformed from a private library into a public research institution in cultural history, with scholars such as Ernst Cassirer and Erwin Panofsky as associates. Upon Warburg's death in 1929, Saxl became director of the Institute, which continued to function as an international centre for humanistic learning, lectures and publications, but by 1933, it was becoming clear that these values and activities could not survive in Nazi Germany. It was at this point that the young Raymond Klibansky, an associate of the Institute who was based at Heidelberg University, convinced Fritz Saxl and members of the Warburg family that leaving Germany as soon as possible was, in fact, essential for the preservation of this German centre of humanistic learning.

With profound foresight, Klibansky urged his conviction that the Institute could, and indeed must, carry on its pivotal role in the study of European civilization in another context. His suggestion of moving to London was pursued, and accomplished, with the aid of Edgar Wind, when English donors agreed to provide financial backing for the transfer. Later in 1933, the Warburgian scholars and librarians, together with the Institute's 60,000 books, arrived in London, where Klibansky was already negotiating arrangements with the University of London.² The library was installed first in Thames House, then the Imperial Institute Buildings in South Kensington. Its affiliation with the University of London, initially consisting of physical accommodation, was extended to full academic incorporation

in 1944, and the Warburg Institute moved into its present home in Woburn Square in 1958.

During these formative years of the Institute's relocation and new academic status, Raymond Klibansky served as its Director of Studies, in 1947–48. Despite the dramatic changes in location and status that Warburg's library underwent, however, its directors had ensured that distinctive features of its intellectual identity remained intact, and for their unwavering belief in, and preservation of, these values we are extremely grateful. The humanistic principles upheld by the Warburg Institute, having survived first the threat of annihilation by an oppressive political regime ideologically opposed to those principles, then the major geographical and cultural transferal from Hamburg to London, and finally absorption into a larger academic institution, remain valid and intact. Their very survival under these difficult circumstances is in itself inspirational.

The Warburg Institute's most distinctive and unchanging intellectual characteristic is its interdisciplinarity. Although the idea of defining one's intellectual interests, and carrying out research, across traditional disciplines is currently promoted with enthusiasm at Canadian universities, and regarded as if it were a recent academic concept, it has always been central to scholarship at the Warburg Institute. Aby Warburg's research embraced the study of social, political, religious, scientific, philosophical, literary and artistic aspects of early modern European civilization, in a quest for understanding how one culture defines itself with reference to the memory of another (in this case, classical antiquity). Other great scholars at the Institute worked collaboratively on themes ranging over similar disciplines – notably Raymond Klibansky, Fritz Saxl and Erwin Panofsky in their study, *Saturn and Melancholy*, which will be discussed here by Jean-Philippe Uzel.

Art-historical research at the Warburg has never been pre-occupied with aesthetic quality, stylistic development, connoisseurship or iconography as ends in themselves. Rather, the study of visual imagery has been significant as one way of understanding patterns of continuity and change in larger human concerns, or as the visually manifest nexus of social and ideological transactions. Commitment to specific theoretical positions as the underpinnings of these investigations has, not surprisingly, changed over the past eighty years. Whereas Warburg and his immediate followers adhered to a Cassirerian conceptualization of *Kulturwissenschaft*, for example, Gombrich was more preoccupied with the relationships between visual images and theories of perception, while Baxandall focused on the beholder's categories of visual assessment and their critical articulation. Throughout all of these transmutations, however, there have remained certain constants. One of these has been

analysing symptoms of European civilization's persistent preoccupation with its Greco-Roman past. Another has been seeking to understand historically the incentives underlying the need to give visual expression to both human experience and abstract values.

Given its essential interdisciplinarity, the Warburg Institute's distinctive approaches to the art of the past are difficult to characterize with any degree of precision. Traditionally, they have been defined in contradistinction to those of the Courtauld Institute, that second great research centre for art history at the University of London. Because the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes have shared publication of a scholarly journal, and enjoyed friendly relations, for many years, the two institutes have often been conflated by the uninformed, sometimes to the chagrin of those attached to both institutions. As scholars at the Warburg, we were always indignant if mistaken for Courtauld students, whom we caricatured as toffee-nosed British connoisseurs, while Courtauld students seemed no less offended to be mistakenly identified with the frumpily bookish and esoteric preoccupations of those who were "at the Warburg". Whereas Courtauld students remained focused on works of art, Warburgians immersed themselves in the analysis of the intellectual processes and values associated with images which, in turn, were by-products of larger historical concerns. Research students at the Courtauld Institute were awarded degrees in Art History, but we at the Warburg all received our Ph.D.'s in Combined Historical Studies, no matter where our interests were focused – on classical texts, the history of science, or the visual arts. When I now fill out SSHRCC forms requiring us to give the designated discipline code for our highest degree, I am proud to check "other" rather than any of the disciplines included, for "Combined Historical Studies" does not appear on that long list.³

The intellectual tradition that has passed down from Aby Warburg is not something which is deliberately taught, or even fully articulated as such, at the Warburg Institute. Rather, it is absorbed while working there, due to the survival of three distinctive features, I would say. The first, and arguably the most important of these, is the continued centrality of the library, and its idiosyncratic arrangement. When the library represented his personal collection of about 15,000 volumes, Aby Warburg had formed and arranged it in accordance with his particular research interests. It contained numerous books on subjects like astrology, for example, and Warburg constantly changed the ordering of the books on his shelves in keeping with his current preoccupations; that is, volumes or sections were moved side by side as their interconnections of subjects became relevant to Warburg's train of thought. While this made it difficult for others to locate specific items, none the less, it opened up unexpected possibilities for the scholar working in

the stacks. As Saxl explains, Warburg believed in the "law of the good neighbour": it was the book next to the one which was initially consulted that suggested an association of potentially rich ideas or information.⁴ However, these associations would never have been made if the volumes had been arranged alphabetically and placed in more "normal" categories, in different parts of the library, or had not been freely accessible on open shelves. When the library became a public institution, it was necessary to standardize its system to some extent, but many of Warburg's thematic categories and much of his organization were retained, and still remain. Raymond Klibansky, along with Fritz Saxl and Gertrude Bing, were responsible for transforming the concrete manifestation of Warburg's thought, the arrangement of the library, into a usable form. The books were never catalogued using the Dewey decimal or other standard system, and their physical placement registers a Warburgian progress of ideas through "Image, Word, Orientation and Action": classical art and archaeology are housed in the basement, with art history on the first floor; literature, books, libraries and education are on the second floor; history of science and philosophy above that, and social and political history on the top floor. The numerous sub-categories, such as "Magical Objects", which contains sections on "Amulets and Magic Stones", "The Evil Eye", "Magic Mirrors" and "Knots and Mazes" are labelled, to guide the reader through the themes in the stacks. All volumes, including early editions of sources, are on open shelves, and it is in front of these that much of the research at the Warburg is still carried on. One may, indeed, look up a particular book on the computer and go to fetch it, but inevitably it is the other, unexpected volumes one finds nearby that soon become absorbing, as Aby Warburg intended.

I would identify the Warburg Institute's second distinctive and enduring feature as the make-up of the staff who work there. The scholars who hold positions at the Warburg have a range of different, but interrelated areas of expertise. They are certainly not all art historians, but include individuals trained in philosophy, intellectual history, languages and classics. Professorships are not identified by discipline, however, but by their period or culture of concentration (Classical, Islamic, Medieval, Renaissance). Furthermore, it is not just the teaching staff who are significant scholars, but the librarians, archivists and staff of the photographic collection. Just as Aby Warburg's assistants, librarians and associates played major roles in the Institute's intellectual programme, so too do their modern counterparts participate in an academic environment in which there are no strict boundaries between "academic" and "support" positions. The chief librarian is also a professor, and when I was a student there, even the registrar, Anne Marie Meyer, who looked after our tuition fees and registration, was a scholar in her own right.

The final way in which the Warburg Institute retains its essential values is through the living memory of the great individuals who gave it form and direction. If you visit the Institute's website, you will see that there is a significant section devoted to its history, including photographs of Aby Warburg and Fritz Saxl.⁵ The persistence of memory, especially in the form of images, is a central Warburgian theme, extending to its own memory. My own memories of my student days there include visits to the modest home of Sir Ernst and Lady Gombrich where, in his study, Gombrich would pull down photo albums which contained informal shots of eminent scholars like Julius von Schlosser. Each photo would evoke a series of stories and memories, relating to intellectual eccentricities or shared ideas. The Warburgian tradition of humanistic scholarship is transferred from generation to generation through the memories and through the examples of a truly great succession of outstanding individuals. One of those individuals is Raymond Klibansky, to whom we pay tribute here tonight.

Notes

- 1 My summary account of the early history of the Warburg Institute is based largely on Fritz Saxl's memoir, published by E.H. Gombrich as "The History of Warburg's Library (1886–1944)", in *Aby Warburg: An Intellectual Biography* (London, 1970), 325–38. Additional historical documentation can be found on the Warburg Institute's website at: <http://www.sas.ac.uk/warburg/mnemosyne/history/htm>.
- 2 Klibansky's role in moving the Warburg Institute to London is described in detail by Michèle Le Dœuff, "Raymond Klibansky. Périple d'un philosophe illustre", *Préfaces*, 13 (May–June 1989), 125–26; and Raymond Klibansky, *Le philosophe et la mémoire du siècle. Entretiens avec Georges Leroux* (Montreal, 2000), 98–99.
- 3 The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) is currently the principal Canadian governmental funding body for the support of research in the Humanities.
- 4 Saxl, "The History of Warburg's Library (1886–1944)", 327.
- 5 http://www.sas.ac.uk/warburg/institute/institute_introduction.htm. An illustrated history of the library is found at: <http://www.sas.ac.uk/warburg/mnemosyne/Exhibitions/kwb/exhibit/htm>. The section of the website devoted to the library includes a full bibliography on its history.