



## Ancient "remains" and "rebirth": A study of Aby Warburg's imagology thought

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**Abstract:** In recent years, the "Warburg" craze has gradually become a cultural trend rising in the related research fields of international and domestic art history. Influenced by cultural thought disciplines such as historical anthropology and psychological research, the theoretical core of Aby Warburg's art history research method is to focus on the interaction between art history works and Western ancient thought and classical culture. That is to study the transmission mechanism of classical ideological and cultural spiritual information and the deformation of its images, and explore how the West can truly understand the recurrence, close-up and sublimation of ancient classical culture in the real cultural society through such open and cross-border works of Western art history. The theme of "rebirth" of ancient "remains" in various times runs through the development of Warburg's academic career, and the exploration and research on it has far-reaching significance for our domestic art theory research and art practice.

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### 1. Introduction

At present, we are in the context of "picture reading culture" in the visual age, and the environment around us is paved with a series of images. In other words, human beings now live in a landscape society composed of images, simulacra and simulacra. Images have potentially become the priority for people to grasp the world, an indispensable part of human life and a potential way of thinking to understand the world. The production and dissemination of images are having a profound impact on the commercial operation, artistic creation, economic development, political situation and many other fields of modern society. Visual factors permeate the whole social and cultural space, and images become an important symbolic representation in the current public life. It is under the influence of visual culture that image research is gradually becoming a hot topic in academic circles at home and abroad.

The term "iconography" first appeared in Cesare Ripa's *Pictorial Manual* in the 16th century, but the search for images in art theory began with the German art and cultural historian Aby Warburg (1866-1929), who first proposed the "iconographic method" in 1912. He believes that the study of images should be placed in the broad historical background to restore its meaning. His

student Panofsky pointed out in his 1939 *Research in Iconography* that there are three stages of iconography interpretation: the description of iconography, the analysis of iconography and the interpretation of iconography, which is the first attempt of the subject of iconography and promotes the cultural study of visual images. In 1972, Gombrich compared images with language for the first time, and explored the instrumental significance of images to the dissemination of ideas from the perspective of philosophy. From the perspective of the development trend of iconography, it gradually breaks away from the research scope of pure art history and develops into an interdisciplinary norm or methodology of image interpretation. Now iconography has become a very important theoretical subject in the study of modern visual arts.

Warburg is often regarded as a pioneer of iconography, and in art theory as the successor to Jacob Burckhardt. Warburg's academic research is wide-ranging, clearly interdisciplinary and dynamic, covering the fields of ancient religion, mythology, astrology, history, philosophy and art. His writings were few and scattered throughout his life, mostly preserved in the form of notes, drawing boards and speeches. However, these fragmented articles and notes have influenced the

development of many research fields such as art history, anthropology, politics, philosophy and aesthetics.

Warburg is so learned that when people re-study him through the river of time, they find that he is not limited to the discipline of art history, and Warburg has used the image medium to summon the life energy of art in time and space all his life. He was the first to use the method of atlas research to classify, juxtapose and compare a large number of historical image data in art history, which had a profound and important influence on the research field of Western art history since the last century. Throughout his life, he has been closely concerned with the great question of the ancient remains of Europe and their historical return in the artistic development of the early Renaissance in Italy. Almost all of the unique academic concepts he put forward in his early years can be interpreted closely around this important question. Warburg insisted that medieval history was not a break in the entire historical structure, and that ancient cultural and artistic phenomena did not disappear in the medieval period, but that they often continued to be appropriated or re-used by later generations in the form of different fragments of history.

## 2. Ancient "Remains" and "Rebirth"

Warburg pays the most attention to and is most enthusiastic about the early Italian Renaissance. In this period, what kind of things artists are more interested in in ancient European art is what he has been struggling to find out and throughout his art research. Early in his career, he said he wanted to reveal the influence of these antiquities on the "stylistic evolution" of early Western Renaissance art. At the end of his life, he summed up the problem in a single phrase: "das Nachleben der Antike", meaning "survival" in antiquity and "revival" in later Renaissance art.

The meaning of "Nachleben" has the meaning of afterlife, so the Chinese is also used as "ancient afterlife" expression, but the translation meaning is thin, based on this more scholars now prefer to understand this word as "remains". What Warburg is concerned about is not the objects handed down from ancient times, but the cultural memory or the so-called life energy contained in myths, images, literary works and astrology that existed in ancient times, and the process of continuous transmission and rebirth through various media of ancient and modern times. In the long river of time, ancient times always appear in different images in a "similar" attitude. For example, the theme of Laocoon in

Greece appears repeatedly in art works of different times. "Nachleben" is to imitate the ancient or imitate the ancient, the ancient "remains" are always scattered in the edge of the image of different media, which can be described as "edge decoration". No scholar or artist before Warburg had systematically collected them specifically, but to explore their connections and gaps (Zwischenraum), they had to be collected and arranged so that they could be examined more clearly. As the last project of Warburg's research before his death, the Atlas of the Goddess of Memory was just such a work. He arranged and presented the images of various works of different ages and regions, different materials, different countries and cultures through the connection between the poses and expressions of the characters in the intense emotions, so as to find the reproduction of ancient times in the later generations.

Warburg, in his raving introduction to the Atlas of the Goddess of Memory, expresses the following two main ideas: On the one hand, artistic memory, as any kind of mnemonics, is fundamentally a record of life experience, and the author believes that this atlas should actually be a perfect combination of collective memory experience and individual memory experience, and also a perfect hedge between the experience of past memory and the experience of present memory. It refers to a perfect blend between tragedy in the manner of action and contemplation in the spiritual conception; it also refers to a perfect unity between self-ecstasy and self-destruction; it refers to a stalemate between Dionysian intoxication and sundivine contemplation; On the other hand, just as we humans expressed our most primitive emotions in ancient times through the sorcery of offering sacrifices to the sun God and the God of wine, art, as another expression of the most primitive emotional form, is itself a "relic" of a primitive form of witchcraft, and still retains its functions like primitive witchcraft.

Ancient "remains" refers to the study of the psychological life tension and life emotion of human beings in the original and cosmological environment, as well as the life representation in some historical or temporal events. As far as art culture is concerned, images or some details of images are not only the carriers used to express the impulse of life in ancient times, but also the media to convey ancient spirits. [Wu Qiong: "God Lives in the Details" - The Thought of Aby Warburg's Imagology, Literary Studies, 2016, No. 1] In the level of Western art history, the ancient

"remains" are known as a direct influence of ancient times on Western art forms of different periods. In the anthropological sense of contemporary art, it is regarded as a "phantom" return of ancient classical art to modern art in the form of "mimicry".

### 3. Appendages in motion

Warburg's first published scholarly work was his 1893 doctoral thesis on Sandro Botticelli's paintings "Birth of Venus" and "Spring" entitled "Botticelli's Birth of Venus" and "Spring" - Antiquarian Ideas in the Early Italian Renaissance", and he later began to use Botticelli as his main case. From the unique perspective of art psychology, this paper reinterprets the significance of the ancient classics to the art psychology of the Renaissance.

Warburg studied for his doctorate in Art history at the University of Bonn in 1886 and in the years that followed, during which Botticelli became well known in the world of art theory in European countries and began to gain widespread attention as an artist. Warburg chose Botticelli for his study in addition to the academic training he received from his university teachers such as Hermann Uzener, Karl Lamprecht, Karl Usti, and others. Warburg was inspired by this rich atmosphere, which brought together art history, anthropology, philosophy, psychology, mythology and many other related disciplines, and he accepted the new method of applying modern psychological knowledge to the problems of art history and Western cultural history in general. From various perspectives of the development of modern psychology, he systematically explains the various expressions and body gestures of human beings, the evolution of art forms, cultural forms, and the evolution of the theory of world cultural history. Titovignoli's "Myth and Science" and Darwin's "Human and Animal Expressions" provide a new theoretical basis for the study of the Warburg problem in modern scientific psychology. Some of the ideas expressed by Titovinioli in the preface of this book have a profound influence on the later Warburg studies: first, the application of interdisciplinary thinking to the study of human history and culture; Second, Darwin's research on the expression of human anger and fear in his works aroused Walburg's extensive interest in the relationship between human emotion, expression and posture, and thus regarded the process of human evolution as a self-defeating instinct of reason over irrational fear.

Warburg was also influenced by Fischer's theory of empathy (einfuehlung). Fischer also

believes that "empathy" lies in the subject's emotional input to the object, and people infuse emotions into the image through the subjective behavior of observation, giving an image some vivid spirit and charm. [ Robert Vischer, *On the Optical Sense of Form*, Empathy, Form, and Space: Problems in German Aesthetics, 1873-1893, Conrad Fiedler, Robert Vischer, trans. Mallgrave and Ikonumou, 1994, p.94.] The spiritual basis for the existence of this artistic phenomenon creates an impulse to imitate.

Based on all these influences and perceptions, Warburg developed an equally important concept in his doctoral thesis, the concept of "bewegtes Beiwerk" or "dynamic accessories". In the Birth of Venus (FIG. 1), Botticelli's depiction of Venus' hair blown up by the wind and his depiction of the clothes of the goddess of flowers and the Goddess of Spring in the wind (FIG. 2), this concept of image is infused with a stronger social psychological meaning by the author, linking the dynamic characteristics of clothing itself with the expression of human emotions. Warburg pointed out that the movement of clothing was against the natural course of things, and he believed that this form of movement was influenced by the sculpture and painting of ancient times. "The outer movement of the clothes, the folds, and the hair, which Poliziano told him were the hallmarks of ancient art, easy external signs that could be used at any time as needed to enhance the sense of vividness, and Botticelli readily took advantage of this means to express the excitement or even the inner feelings of the characters." [[De] Aby Warburg, "Botticelli's Birth of Venus" and "Spring" -- Antiquistic Concepts of the Early Renaissance", translated by Wan Muchun, in *History of Art and History of Ideas*, 9, edited by Fan Jingzhong and Cao Yiqiang, Nanjing Normal University Press, 2010, p. 330] Classical art is used to express the quiet beauty of the quiet Mu movement. Here in Warburg is completely reversed, he reconstructs the quiet beauty into movement, and reconstructs the meaning of classical art for the Western Renaissance era. In Florence in the second half of the 15th century, a large number of expressions of sports clothing appeared not only in the plastic arts, but also in literary works. Warburg believed that Botticelli showed hair flowing in the wind through bold imitators of Poliziano and the styles of Horace and Virgil, For example, the scene depicted in the Birth of Venus is quite similar to the description of the birth of Venus in Homer's Epic.

Poliziano in his poem "The Battle" more heavily depicts the wind-blown hair and clothes, and Warburg further points out that Botticelli was strongly influenced by Poliziano's lines, but it is clear that they are still only a bridge between ancient artists linking the literary works of the Western ancient world. When Renaissance artists found the need to use the language of movement to make the language of these works more lively, they immediately began to search for the elements of various ancient Western cultures.

It was this form of movement of wind-blown clothing and clothing trims that Renaissance artists used from antiquities. As Warburg puts it: "A series of related works - the paintings of Botticelli, the poems of Poliziano, the archaeological romantics of Francesco Corona, the sketches of Botticelli's circle, the phrasings of Ferrarite - It reveals the tendency of people at that

time, based on their own knowledge of antiquity, to turn to the art of the ancient world whenever it was necessary to express life through external movement." [ Aby Warburg, *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity: Contributions to the Cultural History of the European Renaissance*, trans. David Britt, Los Angeles: The Getty Research Institute for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1999, p. 108. Warburg's work reminded art historians of the importance of the "appendage in motion" in the context of painting, jumping from the stylistic theories of Rieger and Wolflin. Through the cases of *Springtime* and the *Birth of Venus*, Warburg proposed his view. The influence of clothing and antiquities in Florentine art in the 15th century was not to express Winckelmannian quiet greatness, but to express the instantaneous mode of emotion, a life energy imbued with passion.



Figure 1 Sandro Botticelli, The Birth of Venus



Figure 2 Sandro Botticelli, Springtime

#### 4. Conclusion

Through the return of the ancient classics in different times to elucidate the "historical psychology of human performance". Reviewing, combing and reflecting on Warburg's thoughts at the turn of the last century, exploring and discussing the practical significance of his valuable academic resources, has important reference value for the present "image age". By comprehensively and deeply interpreting Warburg's art image theory and excavating its aesthetic thought and cultural connotation from it, it can not only provide the reference of methodology for the current visual culture phenomenon, but also provide more method and path for our country's art theory research. It can also improve artists' ability of image interpretation, analysis and creation, and provide a variety of possibilities for their artistic practice.

#### Annotation

①Wu Qiong, "God Lives in the Details" -- The Thought Context of Aby Warburg's Iconography, *Literature Studies*, 2016 (1)

②Robert Vischer, *On the Optical Sense of Form', Empathy, Form, and Space: Problems in German Aesthetics, 1873-1893*, Conrad Fiedler, Robert Vischer, trans. Mallgrave and Ikonumou, 1994, p.94.

Abbi Walburg, "Botticelli's Birth of Venus" and "Spring" -- *Antiquistic Concepts of the Early Renaissance*, "translated by Wan Muchun, *Art History and Concept History*, 9, edited by Fan Jingzhong and Cao Yiqiang, Nanjing Normal University Press, 2010, p. 330

④ Aby Warburg, *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity: Contributions to the Cultural History of the European Renaissance*, trans. David Britt, Los Angeles: The Getty Research Institute for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1999, p. 108.

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