



## A literature review and logical structure by Aby Warburg, the pioneer of iconography

GAO Minghui

Doctoral student in aesthetics, School of Philosophy, Heilongjiang University. Northeast Agricultural University, Harbin, Heilongjiang, China

**Abstract:** Aby Warburg is often seen as the pioneer of iconography, and with the advent of the image age, the linguistic turn is being replaced by the image turn. "Warburg Study" has gradually become an upsurge in the 1990s, and has been flourishing until now. It is of practical significance to explore and discuss its valuable academic resources. Warburg's academic research involves a wide range of subjects, with obvious interdisciplinary and dynamic. 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. This paper comprehensively and systematically combs and expounds the research on Warburg in western and domestic academia, analyzes the current research situation and summarizes the existing problems and development trends of the research, so as to provide references for a comprehensive and in-depth interpretation of Warburg's life and his art image theory.

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### 1. Western academic research status and development trend

Although he was also the pioneer of modern iconography, compared to Erwin Panofsky Warburg has attracted much attention, because of the ambiguity of his thoughts and scattered works, the western academic circle to his research seems to lag behind. But in the last decade or so, through the creative interpretations of Didi Huberman, Giorgio Agamben and others, "returning to Warburg" is becoming a trend.[1] Now the western academic research on Warburg is mainly divided into the following aspects:

#### (1) Sorting of Warburg data

The study of Warburg was first initiated by the German language community in the early 1930s, and friends or colleagues of the Warburg Institute became the initial researchers. Warburg did not publish much in his lifetime, but he left behind a large number of unfinished notes, lectures, and letters, and the collation of these materials became the primary aspect of the research surrounding Warburg. After Warburg's death in 1929 these materials were largely taken over by his assistants Gertrud Bing and Fritz Saxl Responsible for sorting. They had intended to collate all the material as it was, but it must be said that this was a difficult task, on the one hand, because of the amount of material left by Warburg and the complexity and unsystematic nature of his ideas, on the other hand, because of the difficult times that followed the rise of the Nazis. In 1932, the two first published a two-volume German

anthology of the essays already published by Warburg (An English translation was published in 1999 under the title *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity*), These articles are all studies of different artistic images during Warburg's lifetime. The two volumes are only a third of the six volumes they planned to produce, but the work was not interrupted by the institute's move to London. In 1966, two years after Bing's death, an anthology of Warburg edited by her was published in Italy. In 1977, the University of Hamburg organized and published ten volumes of Warburg's anthology. In recent years, the Institute has also organized and published pictures of Warburg's lectures and exhibitions (Studienausgabe: *Bilderreihen und Ausstellungen*, 2012), *Atlas of Goddess of Memory* (Studienausgabe: *Der Bilderatlas Mnemosyne*, 2012), *North America Pueblo Photos of Indian country* (*Bilder aus dem Gebiet der Pueblo-Indianer in Nord-Amerika: Vorträge und Fotografien*, 2018) And part of Warburg's notes and letters (Studienausgabe: *Briefe: 1886-1929*, 2019) And other information.

#### (2) Warburg's life and thoughts

Another important part of the Western academic research on Warburg is around Warburg's personal life and academic thoughts. This kind of research is called "Warburg science", among which the most representative works are E.H. Gombrich *Warburg Thought Biography* (Aby Warburg: *An Intellectual Biography*, 1970) Zaxl and Bean had wanted to work

together on the biographies of ideas, but their deaths in 1948 and 1964 put the work on hold until Gombrich took over and completed it in 1970. "Warburg Thought Biography" not only provides a detailed review of Warburg's life, friendships, academic career, and the establishment of a library and research institute, but also makes extensive use of previously undisclosed letters, notes, and handwritten notes. From these slightly personal sources, the reader can get a glimpse of a real and full Warburg. In the book, Gombrich traces the main line from Warburg University's nostalgia for sports attachments, to the study of North American Indians, to the unfinished "Memory Goddess Atlas" of Warburg's overall thought development and transformation of the linear process, but also touched on Warburg's mental illness, the view of modern art and society, fear of primitive energy and other issues. The influence of this narrative method is twofold. On the one hand, Gombrich established Warburg as an orthodox, coherent and unified imagist through his Biography of Warburg's Thoughts, which successfully brought Warburg into the mainstream of the English academic world and regarded those irrational theories as nothing more than the trauma of mental illness. On the other hand, Gombrich, as a rationalist, is inherently difficult to agree with Warburg's irrational theories and methods, and the theories that Warburg considers the most important are precisely those that Gombrich wants to exclude. After the 1990s, due to the "image turn", the irrational component of Warburg's thought was once again paid attention to by researchers. Although "Warburg Thought Biography" in Warburg's friend Edgar Wind, 1900-1971 The professor's "Commentary on Abby Warburg" has been strongly criticized, but in any case, Gombrich has always been the most influential and important scholar in the study of Warburg's thought, providing detailed information for the academic community to understand Warburg's thoughts and theories. It can be said that Warburg has been unknown in the English-speaking world before. It was not until the publication of Warburg's Thought Biography that it entered the field of vision of humanities scholars. Another biography of Warburg is the French philosopher and biographer Marie-Anne Lescourret Abby Warburg: The Temptation to Watch. The author draws on unpublished sources from the Warburg Academy and works in Italian and German to combine Warburg's academic thinking with his life experience.

Bean's foreword to the Warburg Papers, published in 1932, and her articles A.M. Warburg, And the Warburg students Carl Georg Heise, 1890-1979 The professor's memoirs Persönliche Erinnerungen an Aby Warburg, As well as an account of Warburg in Switzerland Kreuzlingen Nursing home acceptance

(Ludwig Binswanger, 1881—1966 Works on psychiatric treatment La guérison infinie, All of them are of comparative reference value, reflecting Warburg's unique personality and life experience to some extent.

### (3) Study of Warburg's concepts, theories and methods

Warburg's theory, like his personality or the historical context of the time, is full of "polar" representations of opposition and entanglement.[2] This part mainly analyzes Warburg's image research methods, And try to apply these methods to new fields to provide new possibilities for art and image research. Edgar Wind Warburg's concept of "Cultural Science" and its Significance to Aesthetics, published in 1930, first discussed Warburg's concept of image and symbolic theory. Warburg's student Erwin Panofsky transformed Warburg's irrational-tinged iconography into a more rational methodology of art history, and in 1939 published Studies in Iconography: After that, the history of art was announced to enter the period of iconography research, and later he brought the iconography method into the American academic circle and had a great impact.

It was published in the UK in 1984 (Tributes) It includes Gombrich's 1966 speech to the Conference commemorating the centenary of Warburg's birth, "The Duality of Ancient Traditions: Aby Warburg's Cultural Psychology, the text of the lecture introduces the source of Warburg's thought and his expanded research field, and points out several key points to understand Warburg's thought, starting in the 1960s, some non-German-speaking scholars in the field of art history began to pay attention to iconography, and in 1986, Italian scholars Carlo Ginzburg His book From Warburg to Gombrich introduced several imagologists, including Warburg, to the world of Italian cultural history, and he considered Warburg's treatment of pictorial materials to be the "Warburgian method". It is a very important research method that cannot be ignored and can also be applied to the field of cultural history research, that is, the use of images as a source of historical research.

Since the 1980s, with the rise of German cultural memory research and the study of Benjamin (Walter Bendix Schoenflies Benjamin, 1892-1940) The reinterpretation (Benjamin had a high opinion of Warburg) caused the academic community to attach great importance to Warburg's theory and method. Two scholars stand out in interpreting Warburg's ideas and research methods in a theoretical framework, one is a contemporary Italian political philosopher Giorgio Agamben, 1942-, During his study at the Warburg Institute, he wrote "The Nameless Study of Aby

Warburg". In this thin booklet, Agamben made an in-depth analysis of Warburg's "Nife", "Life after death", "distance" and other propositions, clarifying the difference between Warburg's research methods and traditional art history research methods. It recognizes Warburg's contribution in broadening the boundaries of traditional art history disciplines. Agamben's other book, *Ninfe*, also explores memory and image, image and *Ninfe*. In the subsequent research Agamben also inherited Warburg's image thought.

Another is a famous French art historian Georges Didi-Huberman, 1953-. He is writing ( *L'image survivante*. ) The academic thought of Warburg is discussed comprehensively and deeply. In the book, Didi-Huberman discusses the relationship between Warburg and Burkhardt and Nietzsche respectively, combs the contents of Freud and Cassirer's analysis of Warburg's thought, and also discusses Warburg's unfinished *Atlas of the Goddess of Memory* and its unique research methods.

Esthetic historian Emily J. Levine In his work ( *Dreamland of Humanists: Warburg, Cassirer, Panofsky, and the Hamburg School* ) This paper systematically introduces the experiences and thoughts of these scholars led by Warburg in the turbulent period of the Weimar Republic and their great influence on the whole humanities.

British art historians Matthew Rampley Have published ( *From Symbol to Allegory: Aby Warburg's Art Theory*, 1997 ) and ( *Iconology of the Interval: Aby Warburg's Legacy* ) Wait for the paper. In his article, he combined a large number of archives and documents, systematically sorted out Warburg's contribution to art history and its methodological characteristics, and clearly regarded "the iconography of the gap" as the main method of Warburg's *Atlas of the Goddess of Memory*.

#### (4) Exhibition

Based on the special arrangement of images given in the *Atlas of Liberty*, Didi Huberman has curated several eye-catching exhibitions: the 2010 one ( *Atlas: How to carry the world on one's back* ) 、 Of 2014 ( *Afteratlas* ) 、 Of 2016 ( *Soulèvement* ) These exhibitions played a very important role in the understanding of Warburg in the art field, and Warburg also opened up another way for Didi Huberman to study art history differently from the traditional way.

September 2020, Curator Roberto Ohrt and Axel Heil In collaboration with the Warburg Institute in London, in Berlin ( *Haus der Kulturen der Welt* ) The exhibition hall displays 971 images from 63 plates in the "Atlas of the Goddess of Memory" collected by the Institute and 20 large-size plate photographs that have not been published before in the archives of the

Warburg Institute.

## 2. Domestic research status and development trend

### (1) Translation and introduction about Warburg

As early as the introduction of Gombrich's theory in the 1980s, the domestic academic community has already begun to translate academic papers related to Warburg. In this respect, the pioneer art history magazine "Art Translation Collection", which was edited by Fan Jingzhong, had far-reaching influence and has since been suspended. In 1984, the second issue of the Collection of Fine Arts Translations published Gombrich's *Graphic Study of the Birth of Venus*, translated by Fan Jingzhong, and introduced the relationship between Warburg School and graphic research for the first time in the Editor's Note, which was also introduced to Chinese readers "Iconology" And the first article that translated it into Chinese as the word "imagology". Three years later, in the second issue of 1987, Yang Siliang's translation of Wende's Warburg Concept of "Cultural Science" and its Significance for Aesthetics was published (in 2018, Yang Siliang revised and published the original translation with a few modifications and added 21 notes). In the third issue, Wende's Commentary on Abby Wallburg, co-translated by Xu Yiyi and Peng Liqun, was published again, both of which systematically introduced some important concepts of Wallburg's thought.

In 1997, another important journal of art history, "New Fine Arts", published in the third issue of "Warburg Library: Memory of the Culture and Art of the Ancient Classics" by Fan Jingzhong and Zhu Wenyi and "Important Town of Art History and Cultural History Research: Two articles of the Warburg Institute, followed by the 4th issue of 1998 published Jia Chunxian "The positive and negative meaning of Classical images - A Review of Warburg's art history Thought", these three articles are introductory articles.

Shao Hong's *Concept of Art History*, published in 2003, also introduces the formation of early image records to mature image methods, and introduces Warburg's important concept of "emotional formula", and also mentions the related content of "Atlas of the Goddess of Memory".

In the same year, Fan Jingzhong opened a special chapter in the first and second volumes of the *Shape of Art History*, which he edited, to introduce Warburg's life, thoughts and the Warburg Institute in detail, and translated his thesis draft on the frescoes of the Palace of Schifanoa and Gombrich's two articles Warburg: *His Purpose and Method*. Later, Fan Jingzhong also included Wan Muchun's translation of Warburg's doctoral thesis on *Spring and the Birth of Venus in the History of Art and History of Ideas*, which he was the

chief editor of in 2010. The 2016 book *The Art of Art History: A Critical Reading*, translated by Yi Ying et al., includes a translation of Warburg's "Images of the Pueblo Indian Region of North America," a manuscript of his speech at the time of his discharge from a mental hospital.

Compared with articles, translations about Warburg are noticeably few and far between. Translated by LAN Jiang in April 2016 Giorgio Agamben's *Ninfe* By tracing the threads of Warburg's imagological research, the book suggests that memories of the past can be unsealed only when combined with images. Another work of Agamben was translated by Wang Liqiu et al (*Aby Warburg e la scienza senza nome*) It was published in China in December 2017. Gombrich's *Biography of Warburg Thought*, translated by Li Yuanyuan, was not published in China until 2020, which is also a very important translation of Warburg studies in China, and since then the translation work on Warburg has fallen into silence (these three works please see the status quo of foreign studies, and will not be repeated here). His papers and speeches are scattered in various theoretical books and doctoral papers, which undoubtedly increases the difficulty of academic research.

In recent years, the translation of Warburg's research papers has become active again. In 2022, the "Warburg Anthology" co-translated by Wu Qiong and Xu Jing was published, and the papers officially published by Warburg were fully translated in China. This translation includes 11 of Warburg's papers, with new translations of important articles such as "Paganism in Words and Images in Luther's Time - Ancient Prophecies" and "Portrait Art and the Florentine Middle Class." In August 2024, on behalf of the final achievement of Warburg's academic career, the *Goddess of Memory Atlas* was translated and published in China. This arduous task was jointly completed by Associate Professor Lv Dong of Sichuan University and doctoral student Qiao Hongkai of Fudan University. This atlas provides abundant materials for Warburg researchers in China.

In addition, "New Fine Arts" and "Journal of Hubei Academy of Fine Arts" are both important journals translated by Warburg in recent years, contributing a number of valuable literature on Warburg's thought research. It was translated by Yang Xianzong and Liu Zhen in 2018 Sven lütticken The essay "Keeping a Distance: Abby Warburg on Myth and Modern Art" explores the influence of myth on modern art. Matthew Lampley's 2019 book *From Symbol to Allegory: The Art Theory of Aby Warburg*, translated into Chinese by Yang Xian-Jung and Curten, points out the significance of Warburg's shift from magic-associative symbolism to logically separable

allegorical symbolism, which is the hallmark of modernity. In 2021, Chen Chu Lu and Yang Xianzong co-translated Emily Levine's article "The Other Weimar - The Warburg Circle of the Hamburg School", which helps us to better understand the connection between the city of Hamburg and the academic studies of Warburg, Cassirer and Panofsky. 2022 Peking University School of Art PhD candidate Wang Shan tries to translate Matthew Lampley originally published in (*Word & Image*) the (*Iconology of the Interval: Aby Warburg's Legacy*) (See wechat public number "Goddess of Memory", paper media has not yet published). Based on a large number of archives and documents, this paper systematically reviews Warburg's contribution to art history and its methodological characteristics, and clearly regards "the iconography of the gap" as the main method of Warburg's *Atlas of the Goddess of Memory*. In 2023 Qiao Hongkai's German Edition of the *Atlas of the Goddess of Memory*, the introduction to the translation is sorted out the introduction that Bing wrote for each plate. In the same year, Tan Xiaoyu and Yue Yi jointly translated it Claude Imbert The article "Aby Warburg between Kant and Boas: From Aesthetics to Image Anthropology" mainly interprets the content of the "emotional formula" and the partial version of the *Atlas of the Goddess of Memory* ", which together with the translations of Zhou Shiyan and Qiao Hongkai constitute a few translation materials for the study of the *Atlas of the Goddess of Memory*.

## (2) Interpretation of Warburg's thought

The papers on Warburg published from the last century to the first decade of this century mainly talk about his main ideas and important contributions to cultural history and art history, but this is only a simple discussion, and it has not attracted academic attention.

Until recent years, research papers on Warburg's thought in domestic academia have shown a gradually rich trend, and these papers have investigated Warburg's image theory, "social memory" theory, and comparative studies with other theorists, such as Wu Qiong's "God Lives in Details: Aby Warburg's Thought Vein of Imagology (*Studies in Literature and Art*, 2016) summarizes the thought vein and development of Warburg Imagology around the principle of good neighbors, detailed reading, and the relationship between ancient and modern times. His subsequent work, *The Spectrology of Aby Warburg* (*Social Science Front*, 2022), focuses on the "rebirth" of Warburg's ancient "remains" in various historical eras, and considers this to be a unique methodology of art history. Zhou Shiyan's "The Gesture of Abby Warburg: Image Life and Historical Subject" (*Journal of China Academy of Art*, 2017) deeply discusses the theoretical key words such as "polarity" and "historical

psychology of human expression", emphasizing the irrational color of Warburg's thought. Cao Hui discussed the content of the contrast between Warburg's thought and Cassirer's "symbolic form" in his *Research on the Symbolic Form in the Art Theory of Aby Warburg* (Journal of Zhengzhou University, Philosophy and Social Science Edition, 2023), "Warburg's art theory is the proof of Cassirer's theory of symbolic form, but also the deepening and development of the theory of symbolic form". This is also the development trend of the future study of Warburg theory predicted by the author: to compare one concept in Warburg's thought with other concepts, Godard, Benjamin, Agamben, Cassirer and other theorists will be the focus of comparative analysis.

Although the number of research works and anthologies related to Warburg's thought has also increased in China in recent years, most of them are less academic introduction texts, introducing Warburg as the founder of iconography in the nature of art history.

### (3) Academic forums, exhibitions and lectures

Although there are few achievements in the domestic academic circles in the study of Warburg monographs, the topic of Warburg in the exhibition and academic conference is constantly maintained.

Didi Huberman in Beijing in 2015 OACT The research center organized the Warburg themed exhibition "The Burning Pain of Memory", and made the national debut of the Atlas of the Goddess of Memory (part of the plate), and in the OACT Gave a research lecture on How Atlas Shoulders the World. Later, part of the exhibition was published as a collection by China National Photography Press. Following OACT In his lecture on Eisenstein, Huberman applied Warburg's concept of "emotional programming" to the analysis of specific film works. Huberman can be said to be an important intermediary for Chinese academic circles to contact Warburg's research. The year 2016 W.J.T.Mitchell At the 34th World Congress of Art History held by the Central Academy of Fine Arts, he delivered a speech entitled "Reason, Madness and Montage", the full text of which was translated by Dai Lu, concerning the relationship between Warburg's mental history and the montage of the Goddess of Memory. In 2018, German art historian Fu Wuwei's lecture "Photography with Obstacles - Pictures of Warburg's Trip to the United States" was held at Peking University, telling more details about Warburg's trip to North America and the relationship between Warburg's thought and photography.

To sum up, contemporary Warburg has received unprecedented attention and enthusiasm for interpretation. The Western academic circle also has a

rich and good textual foundation for the study of Warburg, and the Western academic circle is gradually breaking away from the bondage of text and a single category of art history, and developing towards more dimensions and possibilities. Domestic academic circles have begun to pay attention to the study of Warburg's thought and produced some academic achievements, but there is still room to be extended. First, the translation of Warburg's literature still needs attention, including Warburg's anthology and Warburg related research papers. Second, the influence and contemporary significance of Warburg's thought need to be further explored. At the same time, the aesthetic significance of Warburg's image thought to the "image turn", which has entered the "picture reading era" is still a theoretical blind spot, and the contemporary significance of Warburg's image thought still has room to further develop. Thirdly, the image idea in Warburg's study still needs to be further perfected. In short, although today "Warburg fever" has become a "landscape" in the field of art history and humanities[3], But at present, the Warburg study is still in the initial stage, and there is still a very large space for expansion.

### Annotation

- ① Wu Qiong. "God Lives in Details" -- the thought context of Aby Warburg's Imagology [J]. *Literature Studies*, 2016,(01):19 to 30.
- ② Cao Hui. A Study on the symbolic forms in Aby Warburg's art Theory [J]. *Journal of Zhengzhou University (Philosophy and Society Edition)*, 2023,56 (06):85-91+140.
- ③ Wu Qiong. Aby Warburg's Spectrology [J]. *Social Science Front*, 2022,(01):25-40.

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