

JERZY MIZIOŁEK

University of Warsaw, Institute of Archaeology

*Aby Warburg The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity:
Contribution to the Cultural History
of the European Renaissance.*

Translation by David Britt, Introduction by Kurt W. Forster, Los Angeles: Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1999, (Texts & Documents), 857 pp., 178 b&w ill.



There is a paradox in the fact that, despite the incorporation of the Warburg Library into the University of London and its great importance for the English and American humanities, only two papers written by its founder have been until now available in English. The long awaited English translation of Aby Warburg's writings has at last been accomplished. The big volume produced by the Getty Research Institute is not *opera omnia* of the great Hamburg scholar. It is an English version of the famous German two-volume publication of 1932, thematically grouped and edited by Gertrude Bing. Besides David Britt's excellent translation of Warburg's texts, the volume also offers a lengthy Introduction by Kurt W. Forster. Bearing in mind the constantly growing interest in the interdisciplinary study of visual arts, *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity* is a truly timely publication. Indeed, Warburg sought to understand the art of the period not in terms of formal values, as did most art historians at the turn of 19th and 20th centuries, but as part of the intellectual history of the time. He often complained about a narrow specialization in the study of humanities and particularly about disciplinary borders in the history of art. In a letter of 1927 to his friend Mesnil he wrote 'Not until art history can show [...] that it sees the work of art in a few more dimensions than it has done so far will our activity again attract the interest

1. Aby Warburg, phot. from 1925
1. Aby Warburg, fotografia z 1925 roku



2. Sandro Botticelli, *Primavera*, 1480s,
Florence, Galleria degli Uffizi

2. Sandro Botticelli, *Primavera*, lata 80. XV wieku, Florencja,
Galleria degli Uffizi

of scholars and of the general public'¹. Most of his major papers either remain important contributions to the understanding of Renaissance visual culture or constantly stimulate further research. Such is also the case of his ambitious, although never completed project: the *Menemosyne Atlas*.

Aby Warburg (1866-1929) was born in Hamburg into a wealthy Jewish family of bankers. He studied art history with Henry Thode and Carl Justi, as well as history of religion with Hermann Usener. He conceived the subject for his famous Ph. D. thesis concerning two of Botticelli's masterpieces the *Primavera* and the *Birth of Venus* in the winter of 1888-9 while attending the seminar of August Scharmasow in Florence. He completed it in Strassburg with Hubert Janitschek in 1891 and published two years later. Then, being so much immersed in the study of the arts of Florentine Renaissance, he did something that was virtually unimaginable for students of European art in his day: he left for the United States spending several of months among the Pueblo Indians. His research concerning the serpent ritual undertaken during this trip were published almost thirty years later. At the very beginning of the new century, while living mostly in Florence, Warburg accomplished his important papers dealing with both Italian and Flemish art: 'The Art of Portraiture and the Florentine Bourgeoisie' (1902), 'Francesco Sassetti's Last Injunctions to his Son' (1907), 'Flemish Art and the

Florentine Renaissance' (1902), 'Artistic Exchanges between North and South in the Fifteenth Century' (1905). His interest in stars resulted in the epoch-making studies entitled 'Italian Art and International Astrology in the Palazzo Schifanoia, Ferrara' (1912) and 'Pagan-Antique Prophecy in Words and Images in the Age of Luther' (1920). Warburg's serious psychic torments in 1921 led to a three-year absence. While he was recovering from the mental collapse his private library was transformed into a public research Institute. Fritz Saxl, its director, started in 1922 the first series of public lectures titled 'The Warburg Library and its scope'; the same year he published an important paper in the *Repertorium für Kunstwissenschaft* under the title 'Rinascimento dell'antichità. Studien zu den arbeiten A. Warburg's'. In this lengthy study he presented a kind of conspectus of Warburg's work published until 1920 providing it with his own important discoveries. Thus still in Warburg's lifetime his approach to the study of visual arts found its follower, receiving at the same time a kind of learned commentary. In the last years of his life Warburg conceived not only the famous *Mnemosyne Atlas* but organized also an exhibition of stamps. Images both small and big fascinated him to the very end. At the beginning of his vocation he had dealt almost perfectly with literary sources of the most famous paintings executed by Botticelli while at the end of his life he turned his attention to the arranging of selected images presented on big plates in such a way that the ideas hidden in them should become self-explanatory. A photograph taken in 1925 depicts Warburg elegant and

¹ E. H. GOMBRICH, *Aby Warburg. An Intellectual Biography*, London 1970, p. 322

steeped in thoughts, albeit profoundly melancholic (ill. 1). He died two years later as the result of a heart-attack.

The Getty's Warburg volume opens with an Introduction by Kurt W. Forster. His interest in Warburg is a long-standing one. He is the author of two major papers on Warburg published in 1976 and 1996². Forster's Introduction is both illuminating and well-written. It is certainly one of the most revealing texts ever produced on Aby Warburg. Although he is not the first to utilize this approach, Forster is skillful in balancing the biographical data with a clear presentation of most of the texts included in the volume. Thus, the reader is able not only to learn a great deal about Warburg's life, his research in Florence and the United States and the method of his writing, but also about the importance of both his texts and the Library he founded for past and present studies in the humanities. More than thirty photographs selected for the Introduction are very helpful in following Forster's presentation. Thanks to these images, one can better understand the phenomenon of Warburg's personality, his melancholy and – to some degree – the nature of his last projects. However, given the fact that Forster knows so well Warburg's *Study of Ritual and Art on two Continents* one may ask why the volume doesn't include Warburg's famous paper of 1923 – *A Lecture on Serpent Ritual*³. It not only opens a new possibility for studies in the visual arts on the borders of anthropology, ethnography and psychology but is also an important contribution to our understanding of the classical tradition. Thus it would conform perfectly to the main theme of the book.

Why is the English edition of Aby Warburg's texts so important and why does their author not cease to fascinate and stimulate us some seventy years after his death? In answering this question it is worth starting with the present edition of his works. Apart from the fact that the quality of illustrative material could be much better, one should express profound gratitude to the Getty Research Institute for the production of the Warburg volume. We should be thankful not only for David Britt's excellent translation of Warburg's texts but also for translations of all the citations (including those in the Addenda) from the Italian and the Latin, produced by Caroline Beamish and Carol Lanham. It was also

an excellent idea to provide the volume with the Bibliography (which includes all works cited by Warburg) and extremely useful Index which helps to penetrate not only the texts themselves but also the material in appendixes and addenda. It is well known that Warburg never ceased to work on his published writings, providing them with additions and corrections which are full of important ideas and observations. All these writings are included in the addenda published first in the German edition of 1932 and now translated into English. It is admirable to find out that in the Getty volume the illustrative material has been precisely checked. However, one may wonder why the editor has retained the original captions (which are in some cases erroneous), but included current information in the illustration credits. Thus, for example, the caption for the Jacopo del Sellaio's *spalliera* depicting *Orpheus in the Underworld* (in the book ill. 103, here ill. 3) still bears the same mistake produced in 1932, while the information about its proper whereabouts is to be found only at the end of the book (p. 785)⁴. Let us add here that this *spalliera* is housed not in the Lanckoroński collection, which since 1994 is kept at the Royal Wawel Castle, Cracow but in Kiev. However, both panels derive from the same set of *spalliere*; the Lanckoroński piece depicts *Orpheus charming animals with his music* (ill. 4).

Now, to address the question of the importance of Warburg's texts for the study of visual arts. Already in his doctoral thesis he had shown how Botticelli's mythological masterpieces, namely the *Birth of Venus* and the *Primavera*, reflect cultural phenomena of the time. He not only convincingly revealed both literary and formal sources of the paintings but also managed to reconstruct their sociohistorical milieu. For us today, is obvious that in order to approach the content of the paintings depicting such sophisticated subjects as those produced by Botticelli one should ask about the role of the patron and his learned advisers. In the times of the fin-de-siècle aestheticism Warburg's method was remarkably original. Thus he entered the matter of Lorenzo the Magnificent's patronage, as well as the matter of both ancient and modern poetry read in his circle. As Charles Dempsey put it: 'virtually none of the serious scholars who have studied the painting has questioned the essential correctness of Warburg's establishment of the textual foundation for

² K. FORSTER, 'Aby Warburg's History of Art: Collective Memory and the Social Mediation of Images', *Daedalus*, 105, 1976, pp. 169-188; 'Aby Warburg: His Study of Ritual and Art on two Continents', *October*, 77, 1996, pp. 5-24). The latter, originally published in German in 1991.

³ It was also published in English as early as in 1938, in the *Journal of the Warburg Institute*, vol. 2.

⁴ For this and other *spalliera* panels from the same set of panels see E. CALLMANN, 'Jacopo del Sellaio, the Orpheus Myth, and the Painting for the private citizens', *Foliae Historiae Artium*, 4, 1998, pp. 143-158.



3. Jacopo del Sellaio, Orpheus in the Underworld, *tempera/oil on wood, spalliera*, ca.1490, Kiev, Museum of Western and Oriental Art

3. Jacopo del Sellaio, Orfeusz w Hadesie, *tempera i olej na desce, spalliera*, ca.1490, Kijów, Muzeum Sztuki Zachodniej i Orientalnej



4. Jacopo del Sellaio, Orpheus Charming Animals with his Music, *tempera/oil on wood*, ca.1490, Cracow, Wawel Castle

4. Jacopo del Sellaio, Orfeusz grający wśród zwierząt, *tempera i olej na desce*, ok.1490, Kraków, Wawel

the invention of the *Primavera*⁵. The same can be said of the *Birth of Venus* although this time Warburg's task was less complicated. As observed by Forster 'Warburg established an approach to the content of the works in question and their literary background that has remained unchallenged to this day'. Even in the light of recent studies, suggesting that it was rather Martianus Capella's *Nuptiis Mercurii et Philologiae* and not Poliziano's poetry that was the main literary source for the *Primavera* Warburg's studies on Botticelli remain among the most important on Italian art of the Quattrocento⁶.

One of his principal scopes was to find out how the painter and his patron imagined antiquity, known in fact to them through a few ancient sculptures. Related to Warburg's sense of the work of art as part of cultural history was, we should keep in mind, his admirable precision in locating Botticelli's models from antique art in his artistic environment. On the other hand, his research concerning the billowing garments and flowing locks he had noticed in Botticelli's art led him to further interesting observations. In his short paper of 1898 entitled 'Sandro Botticelli' he wrote: 'The body in stiding motion, the

⁵ C. DEMPSEY, *The Portrayal of Love. Botticelli's 'Primavera' and Humanist Culture of the Time of Lorenzo the Magnificent*, Princeton 1992, p. 36.

⁶ C. VILLA, 'Per una letteratura di "Primavera". Mercurio retrogrado e la Retorica nella bottega di Botticelli', *Strumenti Critici*, 86, 1998, pp. 1-28.

girdled, clinging, rippling garment, the flowing hair: these, again are the motifs that inspired Botticelli to follow his source exactly. We shall be less likely to be 'dismayed' by the artist's submissiveness to his text, instead of thoughtlessly swallowing platitudes about Sandro's "naive interpretation of antiquity", we try to appreciate that his literary allegiance was not a surrender of his own individuality but the quickening of an evolution that came naturally to him⁷.

In 'The Art of Portraiture and the Florentine Bourgeoisie' (1902), dedicated to his wife, Warburg presented his identification of many personages from the circle of Lorenzo il Magnifico painted in 1480s in the memorial chapel of Francesco Sassetti in the Florentine church of Santa Trinità. The study was based on his minute archival research undertaken in Florence. In this fresco, being part of rich programme of the chapel depicting mostly religious subjects, he found a kind of the 'compromise between Church and World, between classical antiquity and the Christian present' and thus one more example of the revival of pagan antiquity. Warburg returned to the the programme of the decoration of the Sassetti chapel in his paper of 1907 titled 'Francesco Sassetti's Last Injunctions to his Son'. This time he paid his attention to the the tombs of the founders in the chapel sculpted by Giuliano da Sangallo, as well as to its altarpiece painted by Domenico Ghirlandaio, depicting the *Adoration of the Shepherds*. In an exemplary way he interpreted the meaning of the centaurs represented on the tombs and tried to find out whether the drawings executed by Ciriaco of Ancona in Athens could have served as models for them. As a source of inspiration for other motives, he convincingly showed two antique sarcophagi available in Florence and some Roman coins.

In the Appendixes to the first of these papers, he examined a highly interesting, previously almost unknown category of Florentine Quattrocento art.: i.e. votive statues and masks in wax. One of Warburg's paragraphs reads: 'The workshop of Verrocchio, which seems to have pioneered a more artistic treatment of votive figures, specialized in the art of making plaster and stucco death masks, which Vasari tells us were displayed in Florentine houses as true ancestral likeness, and which so often enabled Florentine painters to supply accurate portraits of the dead. Verrocchio's shop was like a surviving limb of

pagan Roman religious art: its *fallimagini* and *ceraiuoli* were the makers of what the Romans called *imagines* and *cerae*'. Numerous such votive portraits (very many of which were life-size figures), lost in the course of time, once filled the important Florentine church of Santissima Annunziata. Warburg's study immediately stimulated similar research outside of Italy. Thus, thanks to him it was possible for a Polish art historian, Marian Sokołowski, to discover that in Cracow there also existed in the 16th century the same category of art. objects. Such votive statues were commissioned, among others, by bishop Piotr Tomicki, who was educated in Italy and most probably knew Florentine habits, for the church of Częstochowa and his cathedral in Cracow⁸.

It was Warburg who paved the way to the study of the so-called minor and decorative arts. From the beginning of his research he insisted that the proper study of art as cultural history must look beyond monumental painting and sculpture. He showed his great interest in domestic painting and particularly *cassoni*, which in fact depict a great number of classical subjects. He came across the famous *Carte Strozzi*, which contain a complete list of the marriage chests produced in the years between 1446 and 1463 in the joined workshop of Apollonio di Giovanni and Marco del Buono⁹. He prepared an annotated version of the list, which afterwards, with his permission, was printed in Schubring's well-known corpus. A number of domestic paintings are mentioned or even reproduced in his papers. Very often he refers to them in his notes and Addenda. Thus in one of such Addenda is to be found a very interesting observation concerning one of the masterpieces of Jacopo del Sellaio, the already mentioned *spalliera* depicting *Orpheus and Euridice in Hades* (ill. 3). He found curious in it the presence of the centaur dragging Euridice back to Hades. In fact neither Virgil nor Ovid refer to this creature in their versions of the myth. Neither is he mentioned in Poliziano's *Favola di Orfeo*. Warburg managed to explain the presence of the centaur in the scene by finding a text written in connection with a performance projected in Mantua for 1490-1 based on Poliziano's aforementioned *Favola*¹⁰. The text indeed mentions centaurs who were to take the beloved wife of Orpheus back to Hades: 'Li Centauri ancora che l.'intervengono voleno spatio: faranno ogni loro sforzo'¹¹. This and

Florentine cassone workshop seen through the eyes of a humanist poet', in: *Norm and Form. Studies in the Art of the Renaissance*, London 1966, p. 11.

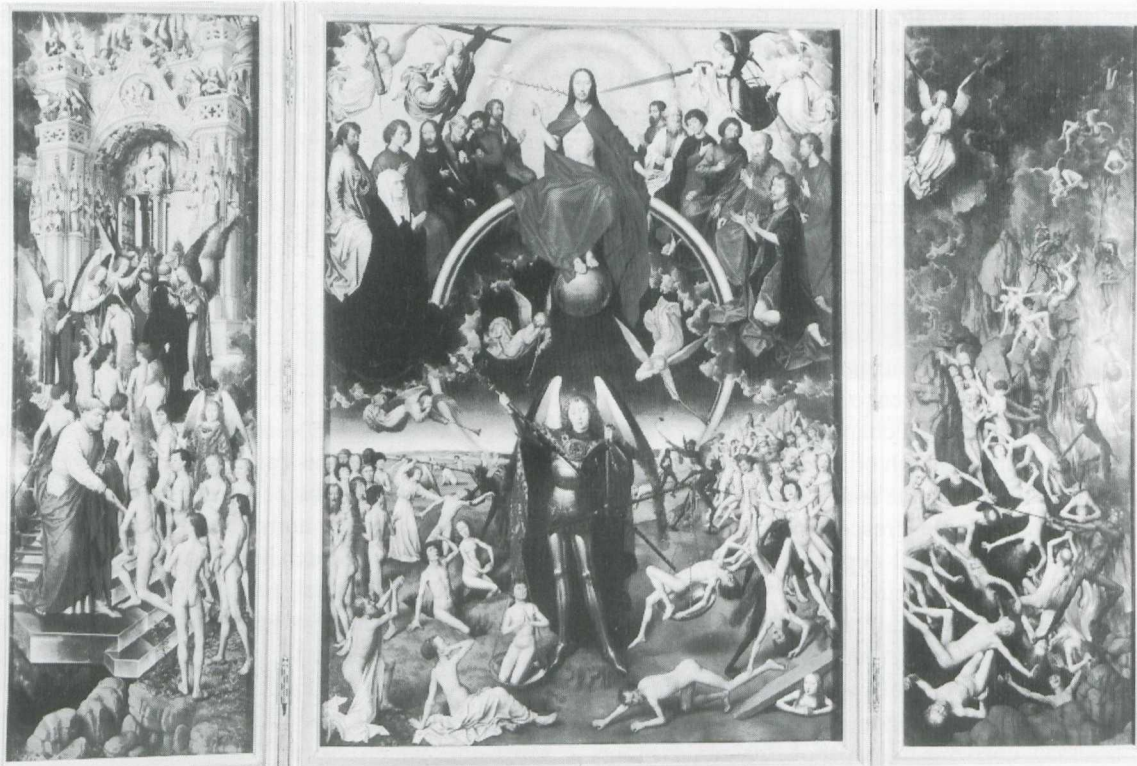
¹⁰ Cf. *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity*, p. 416 (Addenda to p. 124).

¹¹ Quote after A. D'ANCONA, *Origini del teatro italiano*, Torino 1891, p. 363.

⁷ *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity*, op. cit., p. 159.

⁸ See J. MIZIOŁEK, 'Opus egregium ac spectandum. Il tabernacolo eucaristico di Gianmaria Mosca, detto il Padovano, per la cattedrale di Cracovia', *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz*, XXXVII, 2-3, 1993, s. 305 and note 9 on p. 328.

⁹ See E. H. GOMBRICH, 'Apollonio di Giovanni. A



5. Hans Memling, *The Last Judgment*, ca. 1470, oil on panel, Gdańsk/Danzig, Muzeum Narodowe, inv. No. SD/413/M

5. Hans Memling, *Sąd Ostateczny*, około 1470, olej na desce, Gdańsk, Muzeum Narodowe, inv. No. SD/413/M

other numerous observations by Warburg reveal his erudition and curiosity for difficult subject matter. Curiously enough, none of the scholars dealing with this panel has ever referred to his plausible observation. It has been repeated to this very day that the centaur in the Kiev *spalliera* is either Pluto (sic!) or Chiron¹².

Warburg's interest in the myth of Orpheus resulted also in a very interesting short paper titled 'Dürer and Italian Antiquity' (1905) in which he dealt with a drawing by Dürer from 1494 representing the *Death of Orpheus*. The drawing served him to show the 'twofold influence of antiquity on the stylistic evolution of early Renaissance art.' and thus to

refuse 'the narrow Neoclassical doctrine of the "tranquil grandeur" of antiquity'¹³. In fact, Dürer's drawing, as well as its model, a northern Italian engraving depicting the same subject, show great energy and vigour which were almost without doubt borrowed from antique images of the death of Pentheus or Orpheus. In the conclusion to his paper, Warburg states: 'These plates to illustrate the *Death of Orpheus* are thus a record of some initial excavations along the route of the long migration that brought antique superlatives of gesture from Athens, by way of Rome, Mantua, and Florence, to Nuremberg and into the mind of Albrecht Dürer'. Warburg returned to the problem of the influence of antiquity on the art

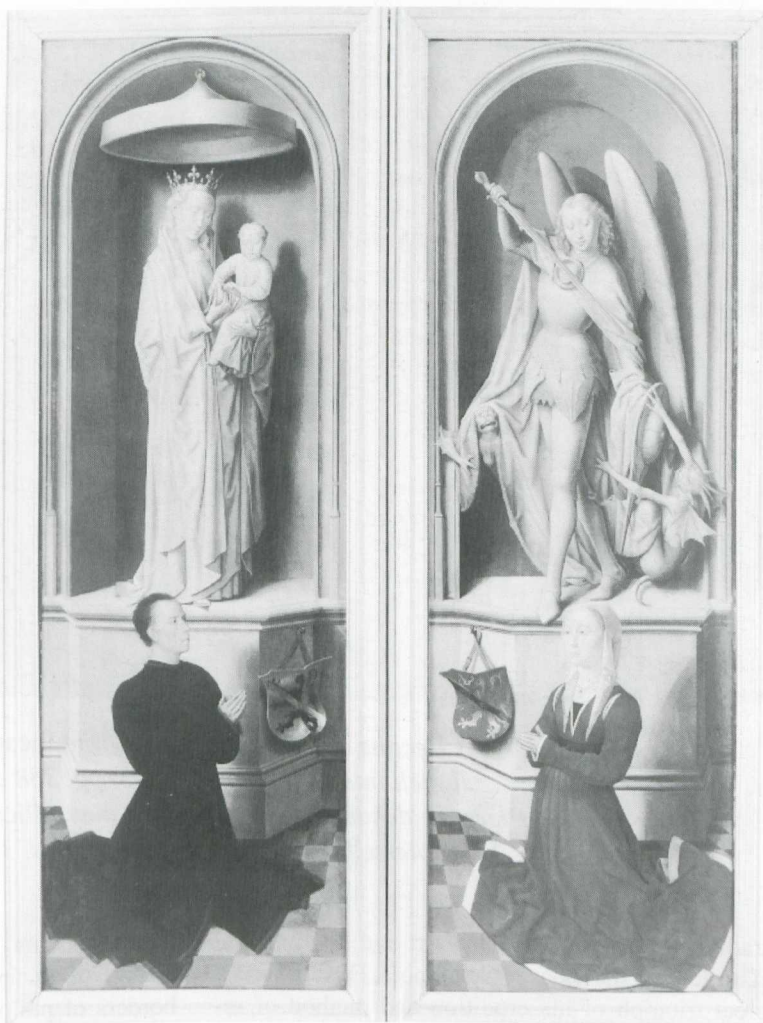
¹² See for example R. VAM MARLE, *Italian Schools of Painting*, The Hague 1931, vol. XII, p. 404; L. de Vries Robbe in: Eds. H. W. VAN OS & M. PRAKKE, *The Florentine paintings in Holland 1300- 1500*, Maarsen 1974, p. 63; CALLMANN, op. cit., p. 156. A. B. BARRIAULT, *Spalliera Paintings of Renaissance Italy. Fables of Poets for Patrician Homes*, University Park 1994, p. 148 tells of the 'Satyr Minos or Mnessillos (centaur)', however the latter mentioned by Poliziano is a satyr and

not a centaur. See A. TISSONI BENVENUTI, *L'Orfeo di Poliziano con il testo critico dell'originale e delle successive forme teatrali*. Padova 1986, pp. 48-49, 122, 177

¹³ Warburg was perfectly aware of the presence in Dürer's art not only of the 'Dionisian stimulant' but also 'Apollonian clarity', cf. *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity*, op. cit., p. 556. For both aspects of Dürer's art. see E. PANOF-SKY, 'Albrecht Dürer and Classical Antiquity' in *idem Meaning in the Visual Arts*, New York 1955, pp. 236-294.

6. Hans Memling, *Side panels of The Last Judgment with portraits of Angelo Tani and Catarina Tanagli*, oil on panel

6. Hans Memling, *Skrzydła Sądu Ostatecznego z portretami Angelo Tani i Catariny Tanagli*, olej na desce, Gdańsk/Danzig, Muzeum Narodowe, inv. No. SD/413/M



of the Renaissance in his two-page outline: 'The Emergence of the Antique as a Stylistic Ideal in Early Renaissance Painting', originally published in the *Kunstchronik* (1913/1914). This time he approached the achievements of the Pollaiuolo and Ghirlandaio brothers. It is enough to look through the beautiful catalogue of the recent exhibition in London's National Gallery in order to find out how Warburg's favourite topic does not cease to fascinate and stimulate us¹⁴.

Warburg used to repeat to his students a well-known aphorism: 'God dwells in the details'. By studying a variety of details in numerous paintings he found out, among others, who was the patron of Memling's famous masterpiece depicting *The Last Judgment* (ill. 5). The altarpiece, which never

reached its proper owner and ended up in Danzig (Gdańsk) was commissioned, as Warburg showed through the minute study of the coat-of-arms depicted on its outer panels, by the Florentine couple Angelo Tani and Caterina Tanagli (ill. 6). Furthermore with this and some other papers he approached the matter of interest in Italy for Flemish painting and its impact on Florentine artists. His observations concerning the 'Artistic exchanges between North and South' have been followed in stages by numerous scholars until now.

Aby Warburg was also that scholar who opened new perspectives in the research on astrological imagery. He showed his interest for this subject already in a short paper of 1905 titled 'On *Imprese Amoroze* in the Earliest Florentine Engravings' but entered it properly in his famous paper dealing with Francesco Cossa's frescoes in the Palazzo Schifanoia, published in 1912. These, so far enigmatic paintings, he convincingly interpreted as a depiction of the astrological programme derived from Arabic and Indian

¹⁴ P. RUBIN and A. WRIGHT with contribution by N. PENNY, *Renaissance Florence. The Art. of the 1470s*, London 1999.



7. *First Decans of Libra and Virgo, from Picatrix, Cracow, Jagiellonian Library, Ms. 793, pp. 388 and 389*

7. *Pierwsze dekany znaków Wagi i Panny z Picatrix, Kraków, Biblioteka Jagiellońska, rękopis 793, s. 388 i 389*

traditions. The paper 'Italian Art and International Astrology in the Palazzo Schifanoia, Ferrara' was a great triumph of his erudition and method of research. Afterwards he produced some short papers on images of planetary deities and lengthy study on astrology in Germany in the time of Luther. His research was successfully continued; among others by Franz Boll, Fritz Saxl and more recently by Kristen Lippincott, bringing not only numerous interpretative studies but also the important *Catalogue of Astrological and Mythological Manuscripts of the Latin Middle Ages*¹⁵. It was thanks to Warburg and his collaborators that the Cracow *Picatrix* with its unique illustrations depicting various pagan divinities and decans became widely known (ill. 7)¹⁶.

Warburg indeed paved the way to a new approach to the visual arts which do not cease to fascinate us more than one hundred years after the publication of his doctoral thesis and his stay among the

Pueblo Indians. He rejected traditional methods of history of art. in order to conduct research on the borders of philosophy, philology, psychology, anthropology and history of religion. His study of images became study of human expression and the nature of symbols living through centuries and crossing the borders of civilisations. For students of the classical tradition, Warburg's writings and the Library bearing his name remain an ever-fascinating source of knowledge and new ideas. The big volume published by the Getty Research Institute will certainly facilitate our approach to the phenomenon of Aby Warburg's life and thoughts.

In conclusion, it is worth referring to the homage paid to the founder of the Warburg Library written already in his lifetime. Ernst Cassirer dedicating on 13th June 1926 to Aby Warburg his book titled *The Individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy* wrote the following: 'The work I am presenting

¹⁵ See also E. PANOFSKY nad F. SAXL, *Classical Mythology in Medieval Art*. „Metropolitan Museum Studies”, VI, part 2, 1932/1933, pp. 228-290; J. SEZNEC, *The Survival of the Pagan Gods. The Mythological Tradition and Its Place in Renaissance Humanism and Art*. Trans. by B. F. Sessions, New York 1953 (first published as Le

Survivance des dieux antiques. <Studies of the Warburg Institute, vol. XI>, London 1940).

¹⁶ *Picatrix. The Latin version of the Ghayat Al-Hakim*, ed. by D. PINGREE, London, The Warburg Institute, 1996.

to you on your sixtieth birthday was to have been a purely personal expression of my deep friendship and devotion. But I could not have completed the work, had I not been able to enjoy the constant stimulation and encouragement of that group of scholars whose intellectual centre is your library. Therefore, I am speaking today not in my name alone, but in the name of this group of scholars, and in the name of all those who have long honoured you as a leader in the field of intellectual history. For the past three decades, the Warburg Library has quietly and consistently endeavoured to gather materials for research in intellectual and cultural history. And it has done

much more besides. With a forcefulness that is rare, it has held up before us the principles which must govern such research. In its organization and in its intellectual structure, the Library embodies the idea of the methodological unity of all fields and all currents of intellectual history¹⁷. It would be difficult to find a more telling text about the wide range of scholars who in Warburg's writings and his famous Library have found either a base or stimulating ideas for their research. It should be remembered that another of Robert Curtius's famous books, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, was dedicated to the memory of Aby Warburg¹⁸.

¹⁷ E. CASSIRER, *The Individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy*, transl. M. Domandi, Oxford 1963, p. XV (first published as *Individuum und Kosmos in der Philosophie der Renaissance*, Berlin 1927).

¹⁸ First published as *Europäische Literatur und lateinisches Mittelalter*, Bern 1948. First English edition appeared in 1953 (Bollingen Series).

I would like to express my gratitude to the Muzeum Narodowe, Gdańsk, The Wawel Royal Castle, Cracow and the Soprintendenza per i Beni Artistici e Storici di Firenze for allowing me to reproduce photographs nos. 2, 4, 5-6.