

Aby Warburg's 'Bilderatlas Mnemosyne': systems of knowledge and iconography

Warburg's last, unfinished project, the 'Bilderatlas Mnemosyne', was the subject of two recent exhibitions in Berlin that sought to elucidate the many enigmas of his attempt to place images in relation to the history of ideas.

by FRANK ZÖLLNER

AS A SCIENTIFIC DISCIPLINE (*Wissenschaft*), art history primarily consists in establishing relationships between pictorial systems and systems of knowledge, in order that intellectual insights may be gained from these conjunctions. The complexity and indeed the problematic nature of this approach is particularly evident in the late projects of Aby Warburg (1866–1929), in which he mounted arrangements of imagery in various media on large display panels, material that included photographs, collotypes, postage stamps and on occasion even books. In Warburg's last project, the *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne*, some of the display panels featured advertising art and newspaper clippings. On the basis of these arrangements of imagery, Warburg sought to elucidate certain motifs and connections and to place them in an overarching context relating to the history of ideas. His thematic interests centred, above all, on the influence of ancient pictorial formulas in the post-antique era; the transmission of information about the Olympian gods within astrological traditions; the *Wanderstraßen der Kultur* (pathways of culture), as he termed them; the alignment of humanity within the cosmos; and the creation of *Denkraum der Besonnenheit*, or 'conceptual space for reflection' – in his intellectual biography of Warburg, Ernst Gombrich translates *Denkraum* as 'awareness of distance between the self and the outer world'.¹

The *Mnemosyne* project remained unfinished and its last series, photographed in 1929, comprising photographs mounted on sixty-three panels, must be described as a fragment.² Warburg never wrote the explanatory texts he planned for the *Bilderatlas*, which would have run to around four hundred printed pages, and he thus never formulated the findings that underpinned the project. What he may have intended in his arrangement of imagery on panels has to be painstakingly

1. Panel B from *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne*, photographed in October 1929. (Warburg Institute, London).

garnered from a variety of sources: his published and unpublished writings; the diary of the *Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek Warburg* (the Warburg Library of Cultural Studies; KBW), now published; a surviving fragment of the introduction to the *Bilderatlas*; Warburg's correspondence; his unpublished diaries; and remarks made by his closest colleagues.³

The *Mnemosyne* project thus comprises a pictorial system that allows us only vaguely to identify its essential characteristics. It is not always evident from the layout of the individual panels of the *Bilderatlas* where Warburg's priorities lay. It is not clear whether, for example, he was proceeding on the basis of an idea that he wished to illustrate by means of an arrangement of images, or whether he chose in a rather more intuitive fashion to combine evocative images and objects, without having deliberated over the whole prior to mounting the arrangement. It was perhaps as a result of this uncertainty that Georges Didi-Huberman hypothesised in relation to the *Bilderatlas* that Warburg was not attempting to 'decode pictorial enigmas, but to create them himself'.⁴ Such an approach, however, does not accord in any way with the firm belief in the values of the European Enlightenment that Warburg had formulated for himself and sought to put into effect in the majority of his publications.⁵

The images and iconographical system featured in Warburg's *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne* were the subjects of a comprehensive exhibition, *Aby Warburg: Bilderatlas Mnemosyne – The Original*, at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin (1st September–30th November). Almost concurrently, the Gemäldegalerie, Berlin, showed *Between Cosmos and Pathos: Berlin Works from Aby Warburg's Mnemosyne Atlas* (8th August–1st November),

1 E.H. Gombrich: *Aby Warburg: An Intellectual Biography*, London 1970, p.252.

2 The photographs document 63 panels, of which three are labelled A, B and C respectively. The remaining 60 have numbers running from 1 to 79, but several panels are missing and some have more than one number.

3 See A. Warburg: *Tagebuch der Kultur-*

wissenschaftlichen Bibliothek Warburg. Mit Einträgen von Gertrud Bing und Fritz Saxl, ed. K. Michels and C. Schoell-Glass, Berlin 2001, pp.434 and 543; P. van Huisstede: 'Der Mnemosyne-Atlas. Ein Laboratorium der Bildgeschichte', in R. Galitz and B. Reimers, eds.: *Aby M. Warburg, 'Ekstatische Nymphen' [...] trauernder Flußgott? Porträt eines*

Gelehrten, Hamburg 1995, pp.130–70; and A. Warburg: *Der Bilderatlas MNEMOSYNE*, ed. Martin Warnke, 4th edn, Berlin 2012, pp.vii and xix.

4 G. Didi-Huberman: *Das Nachleben der Bilder. Kunstgeschichte und Phantomzeit bei Aby Warburg*, Berlin 2010, p.546. The book was first published in French as *L'image survivante*:

histoire de l'art et temps des fantômes selon Aby Warburg, Paris 2002.

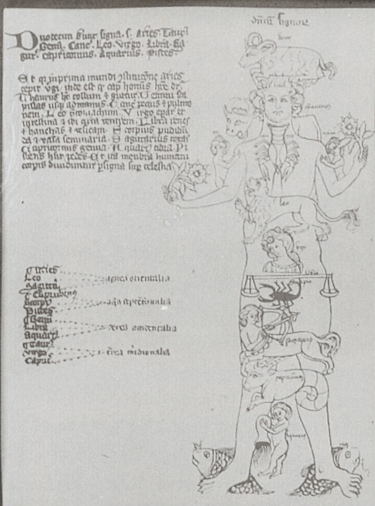
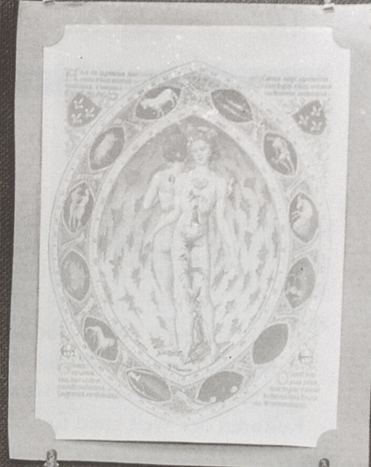
5 Warburg Institute Archive, London, III. 133.3.4, autobiographical notes by Warburg on his intellectual background. See also E.H. Gombrich: 'Aby Warburg: his aims and methods: an anniversary lecture', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 62 (1999), pp.268–82.



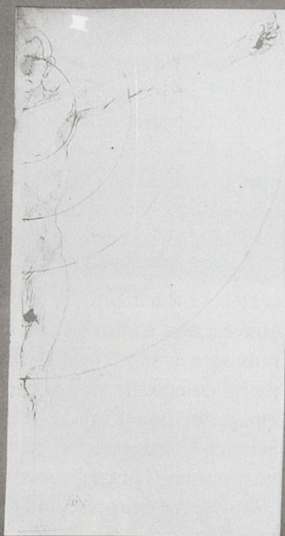
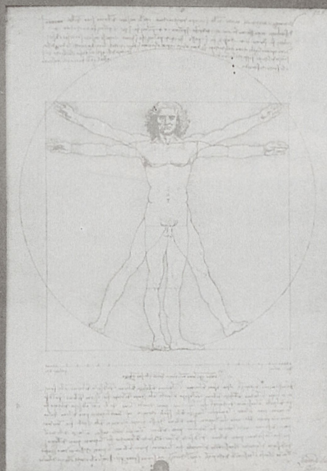
DER MENSCH IN KORPER DER KOSMISCHEN GEWALTEN
DARSTELLUNG EINES VISION DER HEILIGEN HILDEGARD VON BINGEN (XII JAHRH)



HERAKLES ALS WELTENSCHUTZER SEINE KÖRPERTEILE DEN HERKESZEICHEN ZUGESCHRIEBEN



EINTEILUNG DES KÖRPERS NACH DEN TIERKREISTEICHEN ZUM ZWECK DES ADERLASSENS
(DEUTSCHE HANDSCHRIFT DES XV. JAHRS)



ADERLASSEN ZU GUTER UND BÖSER FRIST UND SEINE FOLGEN (KALENDER BASEL 1490)



DER PLANETENMENSCH NACH AGRIPPA VON NETTESHEIM (1510)



AUFTEILUNG DER HAND NACH DEN PLANETEN VON AGRIPPA VON NETTESHEIM (1510)

a selection of around thirty objects from Berlin collections that featured or were illustrated in the *Bilderatlas*.⁶ The exhibitions complemented one another to a certain degree. The curators at the Gemäldegalerie offered a more in-depth consideration of the individual objects that Warburg chose for inclusion in the *Bilderatlas* and addressed their placement in the arrangement of its panels, whereas the larger exhibition at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt tried to find an encompassing viewpoint from which to grasp the project. Both exhibitions were accompanied by publications;⁷ in the case of the *Bilderatlas* exhibition, a monumental volume has been produced in collaboration with the Warburg Institute, London, offering excellent reproductions of the panels comprising the *Bilderatlas*.⁸ The volume features the short (and fragmentary) original introductory text by Warburg in German with a translation into English, and four articles on the genesis of the *Bilderatlas* together with an introduction by Bill Sherman, Director of the Warburg Institute, followed by images of the panels.

At the heart of the exhibition at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt was an attempt to recreate the original panels of Warburg's *Bilderatlas* project, which are well documented in black-and-white photographs taken in 1929. The individual objects featured on the panels have almost all been identified correctly in various publications in recent years.⁹ The exhibition curators have again, however, painstakingly verified the objects selected by Warburg for his *Bilderatlas* and have located the original photographs of them in the photographic collection and archive of the Warburg Institute, London, together with several outline plans and drawings, and have mounted them on display panels. Where they have not been able to find the originals, new photographs of the objects have been used.

Smaller sections at the margins of the exhibition were dedicated to various subthemes, including fragments of text by Warburg on the subject of the *Bilderatlas* (reproduced in the accompanying book) and his famous card indexes. Brief explanatory panels and several exhibits and photographs focus on the KBW in Hamburg, its activities and progressive methodologies as well as the most prominent protagonists in Warburg's circle. At the entrance, before one entered the exhibition, there was a general introduction to the *Mnemosyne* project, in which the conventions and functions of traditional pictorial compendiums took centre stage.

The themes presented at the start of the exhibition and at its margins were the easiest for visitors to grasp. They provided a good overview of the KBW as an organic unit, at the heart of which was of course Warburg himself. They also offered insight into the web of colleagues, friends and relations beyond his library, a network that was of enormous significance to Warburg's way of working. When one scours the correspondence database at the Warburg Institute and the diary of the KBW, it quickly becomes evident that Warburg's methodology involved constant consultation with his colleagues and friends. First and foremost was Fritz Saxl (1890–1948), who frequently contributed material, references from sources and research findings, and provided translations of difficult texts as well as suggestions in relation to Warburg's projects.

For someone who knows the material well, the exhibition had a great deal to offer, including many new research findings. That said, the core of the exhibition, made up of the reconstructed panels of the *Mnemosyne* project, was markedly harder to understand than the smaller, marginal

thematic sections. Installed along the walls and windows were a series of seven curved sections of different sizes, each with several of Warburg's panels fixed to it, together forming an ellipse. The sections showed the entire *Bilderatlas* and are titled: 'Ancient Predisposition' (panels 1–8); 'Return of Antiquity to Italy' (panels 20–28/29); 'The North and Florence/Botticelli' (panels 30–39); 'Antiquity in Italy and Florence/Ghirlandaio' (panels 40–48); 'Mantegna/Manet/Dürer' (panels 49–59); 'Festival Culture' (panels 60–64); and 'Baroque – Era of Rembrandt, Warburg's Present Time' (panels 70–76).¹⁰ The titles of the seven sections, which were not by Warburg himself, were printed on the floor at the beginning of each thematic section of the exhibition. The first three panels of the *Bilderatlas* were the only ones not to be captioned in this manner. This is a little surprising since of all of the panels comprising the *Bilderatlas* these three were conceived by Warburg as a single entity and labelled with the letters A, B and C whereas the others were given Arabic numerals. The panels A, B, and C as well as the first numbered panels deal with humanity's place in the cosmos.

Although the division of the exhibition into seven sections worked well at times, the installation belied the fact that Warburg's project contains apparent gaps and is incomplete. The explanations in the accompanying book, in which the section titles are briefly discussed, are also not particularly helpful. Unfortunately, the keyword explanatory headings for each individual panel, which were recorded by Gertrud Bing (1892–1964), Warburg's assistant and later Director of the Warburg Institute, are not reproduced in the exhibition. They are published in the book, but only in English translation and not in the German original, unlike the reprinted introduction to the *Bilderatlas* by Warburg. Although these headings are only apocryphal survivals of Warburg's ideas, the style of the titles, several of the compound words and many of the neologisms are reminiscent of his propensity and talent for coining new terms and unexpected phrasing. Good examples of this include, on panels 45–48 and 50–51, 'Superlative der Gebärdensprache' (superlative nature of gestural language), 'Eilbringitte' (a composite of Eile, meaning hurry, bringen, meaning to bear or bring, and the name Brigitte); 'Ninfa als Schutzengel und als Kopffägerin' (Nymph as guardian angel and chief huntress); 'Fortuna als Auseinandersetzungssymbol des sich befreienden Menschen' (Fortuna as a conflictual symbol of man in the process of freeing himself); 'Aufteilung und Handbarmachung' (partitioning and making manageable); and 'energetische Inversion des Überreitens' (energetic inversion of overriding). Even though these headings seem not to have been set down by Warburg himself, they reliably mirror his ideas to some degree and parallel his occasionally cryptic style. In any case, they are more authentic than the above-mentioned division of the exhibition into seven segments.

One major virtue of the exhibition was the presentation of Warburg's original panels very much as they must once have appeared. Some of the old photographs are rather faded and the paper objects have yellowed, with the result that a certain aura and magic emanates from the layouts. This caters more to the prevailing enthusiasm for Warburg than to critical academic discourse. However, the recreated panels and their high-quality reproductions allow one to make observations that were previously impossible or extremely difficult to make on the basis of historical

6 Both exhibitions, which closed early because of the coronavirus pandemic, can be viewed online at <https://warburg.sas.ac.uk/aby-warburgs-bilderatlas-mnemosyne-virtual-exhibition>, accessed 12th November 2020.

7 Catalogue to the exhibition at the Gemäldegalerie, Berlin: *Zwischen Kosmos und Pathos: Berliner Werke aus Aby Warburgs Bilderatlas Mnemosyne* /

Between Cosmos and Pathos: Berlin Works from Aby Warburg's Mnemosyne Atlas. By Neville Rowley and Jörg Vollnagel. 120 pp. incl. 87 col. ills. (Deutscher Kunstverlag, Berlin, 2020), €29. ISBN 978-422-98288-8.

8 R. Ohrt and A. Heil, eds: *Aby Warburg: Bilderatlas MNEMOSYNE – The Original*. 184 pp. incl. 83 col. + b. & w. ills. (Haus der Kulturen der

Welt, Berlin, The Warburg Institute, London, and Hatje Cantz, Berlin, 2020), €200. ISBN 978-3-7757-4693-9.

9 See especially M. Warnke and C. Brink, eds: *Der Bilderatlas: Mnemosyne (Gesammelte Schriften, II.1)*, 4th edn, Berlin 2012; and M. Koos et al.: *Begleitmaterial zur Ausstellung 'Aby M. Warburg, Mnemosyne'*, Hamburg 1994.

10 The exhibition did not make clear

whether this section incorporated Panels 77–79 as well.

11 See Y. Hadjinicolaou: 'Die Neue Sachlichkeit Rembrandts. Aby Warburg's Claudius Civilis', *Journal of Art Historiography* 19 (December 2018), pp.1–19, available at <https://arthistoriography.files.wordpress.com/2018/11/hadjinicolaou.pdf>, accessed 23rd April 2020.

photographs of the *Bilderatlas* panels. Some of the panels feature colour reproductions of certain works of art (Panels A, C, 22, 26 and 28–30) and very colourful advertising images (Panel 77; Fig.2) rather than just black-and-white photographs. This discovery alone ought to prompt scholars to reconsider in more detail Warburg's interest in, or indifference to, colour."

The curators arranged some of the first panels to ensure that the inscriptions on the verso of the original photographs were visible (for

instance, Panel 5). As a result, one could study Warburg's annotations, in some cases, and those of his colleagues, as well as references to image sources and research literature. The curators have also recorded in the accompanying publication which of the photographs they exhibited were

2. Panel 77 from *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne*, as reconstructed in the exhibition *Aby Warburg: Bilderatlas Mnemosyne – The Original*, at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin. (Photograph Wootton / fluid).



employed in Warburg's other projects and image sequences. On occasion, they seem to have forgotten to include all the references to the KBW diary collated by Martin Warnke and Claudia Brink.¹² Nevertheless, this very comprehensive system of references forms the basis for an ongoing – and, above all, more accurate – analysis of the *Bilderatlas*.

The accompanying publication also offers some interesting additional information. For instance, the identification of individual objects in the photographs is occasionally more precise and more comprehensive than in the previous edition of the *Bilderatlas* – for example, in the detailed titles or references to the astrological manuscripts and publications displayed in the panels. This is certainly useful and may, in some cases, assist viewers to comprehend the cryptic thoughts behind Warburg's arrangement of the images. Moreover, in studying this additional information, one comes to appreciate how important the textual annotations are for understanding the *Bilderatlas*.

Another positive aspect of the exhibition was the opportunity afforded to visitors to study the photographs in their original dimensions (or in the form of the sizeable images provided in the monumental book). Indeed, observers can now view the panels, individual photographs and objects significantly more clearly and in a more nuanced manner than before. It has become evident, for instance, that Warburg did not indiscriminately select photographs that were just to hand. Instead, he had copies made of existing photographs, which were reduced or enlarged to suit his argument. Enlarged photographs allowed him to emphasise particular elements within individual panels. One example of this is Panel B (Fig.1),

3. Panel C from *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne*, photographed in October 1929. (Warburg Institute, London).

in which two woodcuts from Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa's *De occulta philosophia* (1531–33) are juxtaposed. In the original book these woodcuts are the same size, but Warburg had the illustration that was more important for his purposes slightly enlarged to elucidate the argument at play in the respective panel. He also made use of enlarged imagery in other panels (for example 7 and 40). In doing so, he identified a key image in each case, which should be understood as the springboard for his argument. Warburg also adopted this manipulation of images by varying the dimensions of photographs or objects in other projects.¹³

The recreation of the original panels and their large-format reproduction in the accompanying book permits visitors and readers to decipher precisely the inscriptions on some of the objects. A good example of this can be seen in Panel C (Fig.3), which expresses a figure of thought often articulated by Warburg. On the one hand, the panel centres on the mythical, magical orientation of humanity within the cosmos, exemplified by a fifteenth-century anthropomorphic illustration of the god Mars (upper right). Mars the planet is depicted as an armed mythical figure in this primitive image, which derives from what is still a daemonic worldview. Warburg juxtaposed this figure with Johannes Kepler's more modern attempt at observing the heavens. Initially, Kepler had imagined the planetary orbits to be circular and thus saw them as corresponding with Plato's notion of cosmic harmony (see the diagram upper left), although he later recognised that their orbits are ellipsoid. Warburg illustrated this insight in both of the following diagrams (first row, centre, and second row, left). He thus understood the ellipse as a symbol of an enlightened, scientific worldview. This was also given expression in the elliptical floor plan of the reading room of the KBW in



Hamburg. The curators reprised this motif in the ellipsoid form of the arrangement of display panels in the exhibition.

The three final illustrations on Panel C introduce a third layer of meaning: the mastery of the air, and thus, in its broadest sense, the mastery of the cosmos by means of technical progress – in this case, airship aviation.¹⁴ This is illustrated here by three newspaper clippings. Of particular interest are two complete pages from the *Münchener Illustrierte Presse* and the *Hamburger Illustrierte*, each with large images of the round-the-world voyage of a Zeppelin airship under the command of Hugo Eckener. Included was an illustration, which looked as if it were a photograph, said to be 'drawn according to newspaper reports by Hugo Hubert'. A further full page taken from a newspaper, placed at the outer right margin of the panel, showed both the Zeppelin flying over New York and a photograph of a horse race in Baden-Baden. The texts positioned below the illustrations provide insight into Warburg's intentions when organising the layout of this panel. He precisely describes, with a degree of enthusiasm for technical details, how the photographs of the airships were transported by railway to the nearest telegraph office and were then transmitted to the whole world by means of telegraphy. Warburg supplemented the theme of his panel with a brief detour back to the beginnings of pictorial telegraphy by referring to global communication made possible by the latest technical achievements, which he saw as a means of fighting against a daemonic, magical worldview.

An exhibition about the *Bilderatlas* in its entirety cannot, of course, explain each of the panels in full detail. Although the curators attempted to do so in an audioguide to the exhibition, this was not always convincing. The explanation of Panel C makes a rather absurd link between the ellipsoid orbit of the planet Mars with the ostensibly elliptical form of the airships illustrated in the *Bilderatlas*. With an eye to this kind of physiognomic short-circuit, Warburg once spoke of the 'hurrying travellers in the field of pictorial comparisons'.¹⁵ Additionally, the exhibition and the accompanying book are characterised by a rather selective and not always entirely fair representation of research undertaken on the subject. The curators and authors have explicitly attempted to comprehend the *Mnemosyne* project in the context of earlier atlas projects. Gombrich promoted, and worked on, precisely the same contextualising basis. He also made reference to older atlases, in particular Adolf Bastian's *Ethnologisches Bilderbuch* (1887). The authors mention Gombrich's biography of Warburg only when seeking to reproach him for his critical, distanced treatment of the *Mnemosyne* project. This misunderstands the still formidable significance of Gombrich's biography of Warburg.¹⁶ Anyone who has worked intensively on Warburg will know that Gombrich fully discussed almost all of his key motifs and ideas, or at least broached them.

In selecting the exhibits for inclusion in the Gemäldegalerie exhibition, the curators succeeded in lending an aesthetic aura to Warburg's methodological approach. Until now, Warburg has always been seen or thought of as rather black-and-white. To a certain degree, this was justified, since Warburg did after all work with many black-and-white photographs and was dismissive, even sometimes contemptuous, about his art-historical colleagues' 'hedonistic' methods.¹⁷ However, the exhibits at the Gemäldegalerie made one question whether Warburg entirely ignored the aesthetic allure of the objects of his research.

This exhibition was also original in conception and allowed visitors to make interesting observations. However, it, too, was not always abreast of the latest research. Thus, the curators find examples of Neo-Platonic



4. A detail from Fig.2, showing W. Riemer: *Eßt Fisch dann bleibt ihr schlank gesund u[nd] frisch* (Eat fish and you will stay slim, healthy and fresh). 1927. Lithograph poster, 71 by 47.5 cm. (Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Kunstbibliothek).

philosophy in Panel C of the *Bilderatlas*, which does not accord with more recent findings and additionally misconstrues Warburg's intentions. In fact, in this panel he juxtaposed pre-modern beliefs about the stars with a new way of seeing that was determined by science and reason, also a constitutive factor in the creation of an conceptual space for reflection, which was so important to him. In the case of other themes and some very bold comparisons of Warburg's images, one might have wished that the curators had adopted a slightly more critical approach. This applies, for instance, to the interpretation offered for Panel 77. It is not clear whether a comparison can convincingly be made between the lithograph by Walter Riemer (Fig.4) included by Warburg, with its slogan 'Eßt Fisch dann bleibt ihr schlank gesund u[nd] frisch' (Eat fish and you will remain slim, healthy and fresh), and the ancient figure of the nymph or, indeed, with Oscar Roty's French *semeuse*. This requires further exposition. Both exhibitions create fertile ground for such debate.

¹² Warnke and Brink, *op. cit.* (note 9).

¹³ See U. Fleckner: 'Ohne Worte. Aby Warburgs Bildkomparatistik

zwischen wissenschaftlichem Atlas und kunst-publizistischem Experiment', in U. Fleckner and I. Woldt, eds: *Aby Warburg, Bilderreihen*

und Ausstellungen, Berlin 2012, pp.1–18, 165 and 177.

¹⁴ Warburg, *op. cit.* (note 14), p.523.

¹⁵ 'eilig Reisende im Gebiete der

Bildvergleichung', in *ibid.*, p.475, note 2.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.89 and 285–87.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.143. See Warnke and Brink, *op. cit.* (note 9), p.3.