

Books

Probably the largest part of his written legacy, Aby Warburg's letters were an important means to forging his theory of images

Aby Warburg: Briefe

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Aby Warburg (1866–1929) was a prolific writer who committed little to print. In comparison with the limited corpus of his published writings, there is a vast quantity of unpublished texts, including manuscripts of his lectures, diaries, sketches of ideas, collections of notes, memoranda and, above all, letters. If one disregards the numerous shorthand notes jotted down by Warburg, his correspondence probably represents the largest part of his written legacy. As Michael Diers discusses in the introduction to the book under review, already shortly after Warburg's death his immediate circle recognised the significance of the many letters he wrote to a widespread group of relatives, friends, colleagues and institutions of all kinds (ranging from the local postal authorities, which Warburg regularly bombarded with complaints, to universities, museums and other state institutions). The letters have also been an important source of evidence for some of the key publications on Warburg over the last decades.¹ These include Charlotte Schoell-Glass's groundbreaking investigation of Warburg and anti-Semitism (1998), Bernd Roeck's study of the early Warburg (1997) and the evaluation of Warburg's medical history by Chantal Marazia and Davide Stimilli (2007).² The recent biography of Warburg's wife, Mary, and the publications of Warburg's late projects have also drawn on this correspondence.³

This book, a selection of 806 of Warburg's letters from the holdings of the Warburg Institute, London, fits seamlessly into this trend. Although the material represents only eight per cent of the letters in the London archive, it not only provides a good impression of the widely ramified connections Warburg

maintained, but also demonstrates that he was a man of words, a master of figurative language and an inventor of many neologisms and witticisms. His linguistic ability and his love of language are evident above all in the letters, which, in almost all cases, he did not dictate but wrote by hand (see letter no.323), in contrast to his scholarly writings. Letter-writing offered opportunities for communication and self-reflection, and also allowed him to test ideas, for which he deployed wit, irony and sarcasm, rhetorical devices that would have been less appropriate in publications, lectures and other more public genres. The correspondence reveals Warburg's hidden – if not his true – self both as a person and a scholar and shows how closely his private and his intellectual life were interlinked (see especially letters nos.633–34, 648–49 and 733).

The book consists of two volumes, the first containing the edited letters and the second commentary and explanatory notes, a bibliography and supplementary pictorial material such as historical photographs of works of art, illustrations from magazines and photographs of Warburg's surroundings. In addition, there are indices of the letters' recipients, of the historical personalities mentioned in both volumes and of Warburg's published writings and lectures. Regrettably no comprehensive subject index, such as the one that accompanied the publication of the institutional diary of the Warburg Library kept by Warburg, Gertrud Bing and Fritz Saxl, has been provided.⁴ However, the online catalogue of the Warburg Institute, which contains records of the letters by Warburg and his respondents and includes short summaries of the contents, can be consulted as a substitute.⁵ A selection of this kind necessarily has limitations, as is shown in relation to Warburg's letters on the iconology of the postage stamp.⁶ More than one hundred letters deal with the subject, which has far-reaching implications for his image theory, but only two of the most important are published here (letters nos.722–

23), accompanied by detailed comments and instructive pictorial material, which cannot make up for the missing letters. Nonetheless, despite its selective character, this publication will be a powerful tool for research, especially when used in conjunction with the online catalogue and such publications as the diary.

The letters range from 1886, when Warburg began his studies at the University of Bonn, to his death in October 1929. The selection focuses on Warburg's scholarly projects, with particular emphasis on letters in which he dealt in detail with the picture atlas *Mnemosyne*.⁷ The letters from Warburg's correspondents are not included, but even without this context, this is entertaining reading, drawing the reader deep into the author's everyday life, his thoughts and feelings. With the help of the references provided in the commentary volume, it is possible to discover further connections. A good example is a letter from Warburg to his mother, Charlotte, in Hamburg, dated 24th January 1894 (letter no.102), in which he describes a visit to his former teacher August Schmarsow in Leipzig, asserting that he 'would rather be wrong with the eagles than right with the worms' (I, p.121), demonstrating an astonishing confidence for his relatively young age. The comments and references contained in volume 2 elucidate the background and the methodological scope of the statement. As other letters show, although Schmarsow was important for Warburg as a mentor, their relationship was ambiguous. Under Schmarsow's guidance, Warburg had spent the winter of 1888/89 in Florence together with other students. This first stay in Italy and Schmarsow's teachings were essential for both Warburg's dissertation on Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* and *Primavera* and his subsequent study of the history of Italian art. However, Warburg rejected Schmarsow as his dissertation supervisor in favour of Hubert Janitschek at the University of Strasbourg, where he submitted his thesis in December 1891. Schmarsow probably felt offended by this choice, since, in an essay published in 1894, he criticised the approach of his former student, although without mentioning his name. Schmarsow's indirect and somewhat perfidious criticism offended Warburg, who reacted with the image of the eagle soaring majestically above the worms, adding 'I am right and the others are wrong', which is clearly meant to describe his scholarly superiority, not only over Schmarsow but over the entire generation of his teachers.

It is evident that writing letters was an important research tool for Warburg, because

1. *Crucifixion*, central panel from the *Life of Christ*, by Emil Nolde. 1912. Oil on canvas, 220.5 by 193.5 cm. (© Nolde Stiftung Seebüll).



and the world of objects in order to ensure a conceptual space for reflection (*Denkraum der Besonnenheit*). This conviction, rooted in nineteenth-century cultural anthropology and philosophy, forms the basis of Warburg's theory of images and finds particularly vivid expression in his candid letters.⁸

1 For earlier publications on Warburg's letters, see M. Diers: *Warburg aus Briefen: Kommentare zu den Kopierbüchern der Jahre 1905–1918*, Weinheim 1991; D. McEwan, ed.: *Ausreiten der Ecken: Die Aby Warburg – Fritz Saxl Korrespondenz 1910–1919*, Hamburg 1998; and *idem*, ed.: *Wanderstraßen der Kultur: Die Aby Warburg – Fritz Saxl Korrespondenz 1920 bis 1929*, Hamburg 2004; see also the review by Davide Stimilli: 'Wanderstraßen der Kultur: Die Aby Warburg-Fritz Saxl Korrespondenz 1920 bis 1929', *Art Bulletin* 87 (2008), p.723.
2 See also A.M. Warburg: 'Per Monstra ad Sphaeram': *Sternnglaube und Bilddeutung: Der Vortrag in Gedenken an Franz Boll und andere Schriften 1923 bis 1925*, ed. D. Stimilli with C. Wedepohl, Munich and Hamburg 2008; D. McEwan: *Fritz Saxl: Eine Biografie. Aby Warburgs erster Bibliothekar und erster Direktor des Warburg Institutes*, Vienna 2012; see also the review by Davide Stimilli in *The Medieval Review* 6 (2013), available at <https://scholarworks.iu.edu/journals/index.php/tmr/article/view/17979/24097>; accessed 29th

July 2022; H. Bredekamp and C. Wedepohl: *Warburg, Cassirer und Einstein im Gespräch: Kepler als Schlüssel der Moderne*, Berlin 2015; and H. Bredekamp: *Aby Warburg der Indianer: Berliner Erkundungen einer liberalen Ethnologie*, Berlin 2019.
3 A.M. Warburg: *Bilderreihen und Ausstellungen*, ed. U. Fleckner and I. Woldt, Berlin 2012; and *idem: Bilder aus dem Gebiet der Pueblo-Indianer in Nord-Amerika: Vorträge und Fotografien*, ed. U. Fleckner, Berlin 2018.
4 See A.M. Warburg: *Tagebuch der Kulturwissenschaftlichen Bibliothek Warburg: Mit Einträgen von Gertrud Bing und Fritz Saxl*, ed. K. Michels and C. Schoell-Glass, Berlin 2001; and B. Biester: *Tagebuch der Kulturwissenschaftlichen Bibliothek Warburg, 1926–1929: Annotiertes Sach-, Begriffs- und Ortsregister*, Erlangen 2005.
5 Available at <https://wi-calm.sas.ac.uk/calmview/>, accessed 25th July 2022.
6 See F. Zöllner: 'Aby Warburg and the postage stamp: from a passion for collecting to a visual theory', *Marburger Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte* 4 (2020), pp.7–49.
7 See F. Zöllner: 'Aby Warburg's "Bilderatlas Mnemosyne": systems of knowledge and iconography', *THE BURLINGTON MAGAZINE* 162 (2020), pp.1078–83.
8 S. Lütticken: "'Keep your Distance": Aby Warburg on myth and modern art', *Oxford Art Journal* 28 (2005), pp.45–59; and C. Wedepohl: 'Pathos – Polarität – Distanz – Denkraum: Eine archivarisches Spurensuche', in M. Trembl, S. Flach and P. Schneider: *Warburgs Denkraum: Formen, Motive, Materialien*, Munich 2014, pp.17–49.