

E. H. Gombrich, The Warburg Institute: A Personal Memoire, The Art Newspaper, 2 November, 1990, pp.9 [Trapp no.1990P.1]

In 1933 Nazism drove a band of original and profound scholars, then a great library, to settle in Britain. Out of these elements grew the world famous Institute, whose approach to the thinking of the past has incomparably enriched the understanding of art. Will the 1990s see this living intellectual force stifled by British government meanness and philistinism?

LONDON. The Warburg Institute grew out of and around one man's own library, and although it is now larger by tens of thousands of volumes, it has retained the feeling of a private library, with open stacks, and the books arranged by topic in a way that invites the reader to start browsing in the subject next to his own. The Institute is world famous as a centre for cross-disciplinary cultural and intellectual history and its library is both its essence and its basis. That is why the financial crisis in scholarly libraries, which has affected European, and especially British, places of learning over the last decade, is a particularly dangerous threat to the Warburg, which depends for its funding on the University of London. One statistic will do: between 1981 and 1986 in the UK, library expenditure as a proportion of university expenditure fell by 9%, but the prices of books, periodicals and binding rose by 79%. Help is urgently required if the Warburg's library, and life, are not to shrivel. Its only hope is a generous response to the appeal which it has launched.

Though Warburg is the name of a much respected banking house in the city of Hamburg, the Warburg Institute of the University of London derives its designation from a member of the family who was not a banker, but a scholar with a strong sense of mission. Aby Warburg (1866-1929), whose private library formed the nucleus of the present research institute, was convinced that the health of our civilisation has been threatened, throughout its history, by the forces of irrational passions and deep-seated fears, and that it was the responsibility of the scholar to hold them at bay by calling to aid the virtues of rational enquiry and scientific detachment. The problem to which he originally wished to dedicate his research library was closely linked with this conviction: it concerned *Das Nachleben der Antike*, (literally "The Afterlife of Antiquity") in its contrasting aspects of magic superstitions and enlightened self-control. Having interpreted the crosscurrents of the art of the Italian Renaissance in the Medici circle in these psychological terms he turned to the study of astrological imagery as a further exemplification of these typical polarities. Though he wrote relatively little the intensity of his belief and the force of his personality soon turned his library into a centre of research. In the last years of his life he was helped in this achievement by the proximity of the newly founded University of Hamburg which had attracted such authorities as the philosopher Ernst Cassirer and the art historian Erwin Panofsky. His programme also widened; he wanted it extended "to the attempt of understanding the meaning of the survival of paganism for the whole of European civilisation". It was his successor, Fritz Saxl (1890-1948), who succeeded in transforming a foundation dedicated to so personal a vision into an institute of international standing; with the support of the Warburg family he regularised the library's acquisition policy and organised annual series of public lectures given by leading authorities which made the range of the Institute's concerns widely known. A glance at the programme of these lectures (which began in Warburg's lifetime) from 1921 to 1931 testifies to the continuing relevance of Warburg's original vision. More than one-third are devoted to the study of pagan religion and ritual and other aspects of the history of religion, about one-quarter discuss aspects of art history in cultural contexts, the remainder deal with the history of literature and what is nowadays called the history of ideas. Roughly the same distribution of interest also marks the series of studies published under the editorship of Fritz Saxl. In addition the Institute embarked on an ambitious project of publishing a Bibliography of the afterlife of antiquity, an enterprise in which many scholars in many different fields were invited to participate.

These developments, of course, were cut short by the advent of the National Socialist dictatorship which threatened the very existence of the Institute founded and directed by Jewish scholars. Thanks to international pressure permission was given in 1933 for the Institute to emigrate with the whole library and all its staff and Saxl insisted that all members of the team who so wished — whether Jewish or not — should be enabled to make the transfer to England where funds and makeshift accommodation had been offered by an ad hoc committee for a limited period.

It was during this critical period of the Institute's existence (two years after its arrival in London) that I was enlisted to assist in redeeming the pledge of publishing the projects and papers which the founder had left unfinished at his death. The task with which Saxl saw himself confronted in an alien surrounding was formidable. It was first and foremost to find friends and supporters for the Institute who would fall in with his aims and programmes. To do so he had to prove its usefulness to potential sympathisers. An early episode is characteristic of these efforts: having made contact with the wealthy collector Sir Percival David, Saxl realised that he was passionately interested in the life and achievement of Marco Polo and planned an edition of the traveller's famous memoirs. Saxl placed the whole library at Sir Percival's disposal and no member of the staff was excused from joining this collective effort though Far Eastern studies had hitherto been marginal to the Institute's interests. On the whole, Saxl was to find that for all the sympathy extended to the personal plight of Hitler's victims the real aims of the Institute could not so easily be assimilated to English academic life. Neither the study of mystery cults nor that of astrological imagery would seem to fit into the categories and departments of British university education. On the other hand there was one facet of the Institute's multifarious activities which appeared to answer a topical need — Saxl's own original field of art history. These were the years during which the need, at last to establish art history as an academic discipline in England, was widely felt and debated. In fact the foundation of the Courtauld Institute of Art of the University of London almost coincided with the arrival of the Warburg Institute in London:

Previous generations of art historians who were mainly based on the great museums had concentrated on connoisseurship and aesthetic criticism and so it is not surprising that the endeavours of the Warburg Institute to investigate art in its cultural context were widely interpreted as an advocacy of iconographic studies, the linking of images with their textual sources, while the concern with the positive and negative tendencies deriving from the ancient world was simplified in the handy formula of the "Study of the Classical Tradition".

When I arrived from Vienna early in January 1936 it was not so much through Saxl as through his Assistant Director Gertrud Bing that I was introduced to the problems and traditions of the Institute. She had been Aby Warburg's amanuensis and travel companion and was now sharing a house with Saxl. It is hard to convey and describe what her presence meant for the continued vitality of the Institute's tradition. Trained as a philosopher in Cassirer's school she rarely lectured or published. Her strength lay in her capacity to listen and to respond to the human and scholarly problems of which she was appraised. Self-possessed, and rather severe in her appearance and utterance, she inspired immediate confidence. While the mercurial Saxl was always on the go using his considerable charm in the services of the Institute, Bing was like the still eye in the centre of the whirlwind, firm but reassuring, wholly dedicated to the founder's memory and legacy. In those difficult days when bewildered academics arrived in droves from Germany seeking help and advice she reluctantly sacrificed her plan of editing Warburg's papers for the sake of remaining available to the Institute's many concerns and it was her hope that I would carry on the work in the spirit in which she had begun it. Thus, becoming immersed in this task that involved not only mastering Warburg's difficult handwriting but also his ideas and terminology, I was not very much aware of what was going on around me. But at the time the permanent staff of the Institute was small indeed. There was the

librarian Hans Meier, an erudite medievalist who was also in charge of the bibliographical project mentioned above, but keeping very much to himself. The other two senior members were Edgar Wind and Rudolf Wittkower. Wind was trained as a philosopher and had published a book on the methodology of science, but had come early into the orbit of Aby Warburg and became fascinated with the interpretation of images. Unlike most of the new arrivals he had perfect English, having spent some years in the States. He had many contacts in various camps and it was no doubt thanks to him that, shortly after my arrival, I heard the great Niels Bohr giving a lecture at the Warburg with Rutherford in the chair. Wittkower had only joined the Institute's staff after its arrival in London. He had been working at the Biblioteca Hertziana in Rome as a respected art historian until the racial laws forced him to emigrate, when he discovered that, his father having been born in England, he had the right to British citizenship. In view of the labour laws Saxl was happy to have an Englishman on his payroll, and Wittkower was put in charge of the vast but chaotic photographic collection which he began to organise on iconographic principles. It was Wind and Wittkower who jointly launched the *Journal of the Warburg Institute*, the first number coming out in January 1937 with an opening article by Jacques Maritain on "Sign and Symbol". It was particularly in the field of publication that Saxl felt in need of assistance from English scholars, all the more as he was determined to continue the series of *Studies* which had begun so auspiciously in Hamburg. Among the part-time helpers of that period were Roger Hills and Anthony Blunt.

It was not always clear in this period of transition who should be regarded as a member of the staff and who was employed on an ad hoc basis or merely to be considered a helpful friend. The junior research fellowship which I held at the time was in that grey area, for it was a wholly provisional arrangement. Several other junior scholars were in a similar position. Two of them had also worked at the Warburg Institute in Hamburg. One was Hugo Buchthal who had been a student of Adolph Goldschmidt and Erwin Panofsky in Germany and had specialised in the study of Byzantine and Islamic art. The other was my former fellow student from Vienna, Otto Kurz with whom I shared accommodation for some time. The range and precision of his knowledge had already been apparent when he had joined the Institute's team at Hamburg, and he became indispensable as a polymath, able to answer practically any query. Many other young academics, who had to flee from Germany and later also from Austria, became regular users of the library, and so we young people were never short of intellectual stimulation.

Even so the precarious cohesion of the Institute's existence was badly threatened when, in the spring of 1937, the library had to leave its temporary quarters in Thames House and the books had to go back into packing cases. Some kind of solution was in sight but it took long to materialise: the library of the University of London was vacating its premises in the Imperial Institute's building which offered temporary office space to the Institute's administration and the promise of space for the library which was not redeemed until the spring of 1938. During this year of suspended animation, I also had little access to Warburg's papers. Instead Kurz and I were assigned the task, suggested by the then Director of the Courtauld Institute, of compiling a handbook on Iconography for the use of students. It was never completed but I learned a great deal in the process of preparing it. Saxl had been offered the Directorship of the Courtauld Institute but declined, since he felt responsible for his charge. Ever eager to fill gaps where he perceived them, he embarked on a study of English Romanesque sculpture, touring the country with the Institute's excellent photographer, Otto Fein, who had also accompanied it from Hamburg. Studying English and French seals for the sake of stylistic comparison, he hoped to establish a firm chronology based on purely art historical criteria. At the same time he wished to keep the Institute's activities before the eyes of a wider public and thus harked back to his early experience in the field of adult education and decided to launch educational exhibitions of photographs arranged on screens. The first of them was called "The Visual Approach to

the Classics", intended to wean the public from a purely aesthetic attitude and using works of art as documents for the history of culture and of religion. It was a great success and continued to be circulated in schools.

Despite the hand-to-mouth existence of the Institute, however, long-term plans were boldly conceived as opportunities arose. One of them was the *Corpus Platonicum* directed by Raymond Klibansky and intended to document "The Continuity of the Platonic Tradition" during the Latin Middle Ages through the edition of the relevant texts. The other was a plan to publish a corpus of the drawings of Nicolas Poussin to be undertaken by Walter Friedlaender and Anthony Blunt. They were the first in a number of ambitious projects not all of which can here be listed. The Warburg Institute may be unusual in several respects, but in one way it is surely unique: it met an ever growing publishing programme without a publishing staff. It was the expertise and dedication of its Secretary and later Registrar, Anne Marie Meyer, that made this possible.

The outbreak of the war in September 1939 imposed another hiatus on the Institute's activities, and it is indeed remarkable how it came through this grievous crisis. Once more the books had to be packed away. Edgar Wind went to America and opportunities had to be found of helping the war effort, such as service for the photographic National Buildings Records. I myself joined the Monitoring Service of the BBC listening to enemy broadcasts or supervising their translations into English. Two more photographic exhibitions were mounted by Saxl and Wittkower, one on Indian Art and another on "England and the Mediterranean" emphasising the debt of British culture to the Classical Tradition. It was only after a German bomb had killed Hans Meier on the 17 April 1941, with the destruction in his home of the material for the third volume of the *Bibliography of the Classical Tradition*, that it was decided to evacuate the staff and equipment of the Institute to a country house, The Lea, near Denham, where the remainder of the Institute's staff and some of their relatives found shelter in what looked from the outside like a kibbutz or commune. The private libraries of some of the members were pooled and offered quite a good makeshift arrangement for scholarly work.

Returning after the end of the war in November 1945, however, I found a wholly altered situation. In 1944 the funds guaranteed to the Institute on its arrival had run out but thanks to Saxl's diplomatic skill the University of London had agreed to incorporate the library and its staff as an independent Institute in its multifarious organisation. Perhaps the most significant intellectual development had been due to Frances Yates, who had been one of the English scholars enlisted, to help with the publications but whose originality of mind had given a new direction to the Institute's traditions. Her extensive study of the French academics of the sixteenth century opened up fresh vistas as did her researches on Giordano Bruno, on Elizabethan pageantry and on the art of memory. At the same time Rudolph Wittkower had caught the attention of a whole generation of architects through his studies of Palladio and of the philosophical foundations of Renaissance architectural theory. A new recruit had joined in the person of Charles Mitchell who was interested both in eighteenth-century England and Renaissance Italy.

The new link with the University of London led to the establishment of a course for undergraduates in history devoted to the Civilisation of the Italian Renaissance mainly taught by Saxl, Mitchell and myself. It was largely based on the reading of texts in the original Latin and Italian and quite a number of the students who participated took up these studies in their postgraduate work and even throughout their academic career. In order not to compete with the programme of the Courtauld Institute - where some members of the Warburg's staff also lectured occasionally — the Institute's course focused on such aspects as the Revival of Platonism, Emblematics, Astrology or Patronage.

Saxl's sudden death on 22 March 1948 at the age of fifty-eight was a shattering blow and it may have come as a surprise to many that when his successor was at last appointed he was not strictly speaking a student of the Classical Tradition but of the pre-Classical Age. He was H. Frankfort, a leading scholar in the field of Ancient Egyptian and Mesopotamian Civilisations. It was no doubt the wish to counterbalance recent emphasis on the history of art and to re-establish contacts with Warburg's aim of exploring the "Pagan" roots of our civilisation that had influenced this appointment. Unhappily a propitious beginning was cut short by Frankfort's premature death on 16 June 1954 and it was left to Gertrud Bing as the next Director to weather this storm and to guide the move to the Institute's new quarters in Bloomsbury. On her retirement at the end of the session in 1959 I succeeded her, holding the position until my retirement in 1976. The title of "Professor of the History of the Classical Tradition" was awarded to me by the University as it had been that of Saxl and of Bing.

I was aware that this designation did not quite fit me. It is true that I had fallen in with the Institute's traditions in doing research on Renaissance art and symbolism, but I had increasingly moved into the field of the psychology of perception from which I hoped to derive profit for the study of the history and theory of the visual arts. Warburg himself had also been interested in these matters but I was anxious not to alienate the Institute from its commitment to historical and humanist research. In this I hope to have been successful. Though the membership of the Institute's staff inevitably changed over the years (Charles Mitchell, Rudolph Wittkower and Hugo Buchthal accepted chairs in the United States) the Institute's research and teaching remained devoted to fields of study which lay somewhat off the beaten track. To mention but a few: Alphons Barb did research on Gnostic Gems; D.P. Walker on Neo-Platonic Magic and he added the study of the theory of music to the Institute's concerns. Fresh opportunities arose for the cultivation of the history of science through the appointment of A.I. Sabra, an authority on Medieval Arabic Optics, and, after his departure for Harvard, through the work of Charles Schmitt on the Aristotelian tradition and its hold on University education. Original, as always, Otto Kurz delighted me by suggesting and writing a book on European clocks and watches in the Near East.

A good deal has been talked and written about the "Warburg method" despite the protestations by my colleagues and myself that there never was such a method. Maybe the only thing that many, if not all, of the Institute's studies have in common is a certain determination to explore topics in the history of our civilisation which have been neglected because they tended to fall outside the limits of conventional university courses. In doing so the Institute has certainly done a service to humanist studies which has been universally acknowledged. The same tendency also accounts for the change in the Institute's focus of interest throughout the years in which I have known it. At the time of its arrival in England the history of art in its cultural context had been a neglected subject and was thus appropriately taken up by Saxl and his colleagues. Meanwhile art history is being taught at practically every university in England and so it was right, I believe, to emphasise the history of science and of philosophy. Nobody who contemplates the present situation in British Higher Education can be in doubt where the greatest lacuna is sure to arise in the near future.

The enforced neglect of Classical languages will not only affect the study of the ancient world; it also has its serious repercussions on all aspects of intellectual history during the periods when Latin was the lingua franca. I thus welcomed it wholeheartedly that I was succeeded by J.B. Trapp, an authority on English Humanism, whose position has, in turn, recently been taken over by Nicholas Mann, a student of Petrarch.