

A talk with Claudia Wedepohl...

Vanessa A. Portugal

Claudia Wedepohl, historiadora del arte especialista en arte y literatura del Cinquecento italiano, es responsable del archivo del Instituto Warburg desde el 2006.

Su investigación se ha desarrollado en proximidad con los estudios Warburgianos: el arte italiano y la historiografía del arte. Su familiaridad con la colección del archivo la ha llevado a editar importantes obras sobre Aby Warburg, así como a desarrollar su propia investigación, donde explora las ideas de Aby Warburg, su terminología y el legado de la obra de Warburg. En esta plática, Claudia nos presentará el archivo y los materiales que pueden ser de utilidad para el estudiante de temas americanos.

Hello everyone. We are here today to talk with Claudia Wedepohl, who is the archivist at the Warburg Archive, and here we're talking about the Warburg's Institute Archive welcome Claudia, how are you doing today?

I'm fine thank you it's nice to see you here.

Thank you yeah me too, thanks for your time. So if we may start, the first thing that I would like to know is what is the Institute Warburg's Archive arrangement? Is there one in particular?

Yes, it's a it's a difficult question because there is not an overriding arrangement for everything. The core of the of the collection is, of course is the Aby Warburg collection, the collection of his papers and his correspondences but it's an institutional archive so we also hold papers of other scholars who were affiliated with the Institute and the Institute administration records, so every collection has a bit of its own structure but since we're talking about Warburg, I can say yes there is a there is certainly an arrangement and it's more or less chronological. But we have separated his working papers from his correspondences, and the correspondences are a collection in itself, and they start with Abys first letters, so to say, and in theory they run on to the current day but there is not much in terms of paper letters anymore so it has been a little bit petering out in the 2000s in the age of emails. And his correspondence collection is, again cataloged in a chronological way no I should say in an alphabetical and chronological way, so all his letters are separated from his papers. And his papers are also arranged roughly in a chronological manner, but we of course there are the papers we also hold personal papers, so working papers is just a term, but we also hold certificates, diaries, things are really of a much more personal nature, and they are a little bit separate but there's everything which is roughly connected to his academic work yeah. It starts with his earliest work, which, of course there's a little bit before his

doctoral dissertation, but in general it starts with his university studies, which lead to the doctoral dissertation and it ends with the *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne* and the editorial work on the *Atlas* which is also recorded in documents we hold.

Oh I see, and do you keep having new documents or

We do, we do but not Warburg's of course. We get some offered collections, of course people are keen to have the states of their parents or grandparents being looked after in an institution which is publicly funded so to have a sort of safeguard for the future. We cannot take everything so the criteria is a little bit, if that person stayed yeah if it has a clear connection to this institute, and most of the scholars whose states we hold have been yeah staff members or quite closely affiliated in some other ways with the institute. So we have just, like we're actually just cataloging a collection which came to us very, almost before the lockdown in early 2019 but it's yeah, these are the papers of the philosopher Charles Schmidt who was staff member.

Oh that's great, well good luck with that.

Yes, yes

I imagine it's a lot

Yes, and of course people want to see more the older stuff so to speak, we have to wait until these other collections, until scholars will start to get interested in the sort of more recent works.

I see of course, and again talking about the arrangement, were Aby, or Gertrude Bing aware that other scholars would use Warburg's archive for research?

I would clearly say no, because Aby Warburg didn't think of anybody sort of to go through his papers as they were. He was clear minded that he wanted to get everything out, that he wanted to publish his work and basically yeah, renew art history with his works. He was very reluctant to show anything which was unfinished, so his collection of papers was a very personal collection for him. But he kept everything because it was all part of his life's project. He went on and on to sort of develop things further on the basis of what had already done, and if we look at the *Atlas*, that's the best example to show that nothing was really, nothing had become irrelevant, everything sort of got a revival in the *Atlas* project, and of course it was overly ambitious so he in the end he could not finish his life's project, but he yeah that's the reason why he kept everything, and he kept it not in an archival manner, so I would say it's, the *Zettelkästen* maybe, of which we will speak perhaps, are a small archive in his archive, so in his collection of papers. But even that, if we read Saxl, we know he kept reordering and reconfiguring all the time. Once he had a new research question everything had to get into a new order, so there was no strict order, and it was for him alone and maybe for his closest collaborators. But Gertrude Bing is a bit different because she can probably, we can call her, she was certainly not the first archivist but the first person who thought about the collection of papers in a, in a manner which comes close to how we see it now, because she was, she wasn't strictly the literary

executor, but the family had given her the task to be Warburg's editor, to get out his works because so little was available at the time he died, so her first work was the two volumes of the *Gesammelte Schriften*, which of course we know is all published works but why did she do it? Because all these publications were all over the place, they couldn't be read in one single volume and she, so the idea was also to prepare for the *Atlas*, for the edition of the *Atlas*, to get his things in his publications in one place available. And also to yeah, she did a proper addition, she compiled this wonderful index which is the best way to access these two volumes, and at the same time, this was decided really shortly after Warburg's death in 1929, that she would be the editor, and they immediately, not knowing that sort of the immigration of the institute would happen just three years later, that she immediately went on preparing the edition of the *Atlas*, that was the big legacy, that was what Warburg was working on and was keen to get out as soon as possible. So, for that, they were aware they had to review everything, all of Warburg's works, and they went on to the job and did two things: they put them in a certain order, and that is really the basis of the order we have now; and they started employing people who typed all his notes. So we have got a lot of typescript transcription of lectures yeah, of all sorts of materials more or less fragmented, notes too, which they thought at the time would be relevant to have for the edition because the idea was to edit the *Atlas* on the basis of Warburg's own words. And they keep using this term 'mosaic' so they would, basically pull the strings together and find some sort of expression for every cluster and constellation on the *Atlas*. That is still probably a way one could do it but it wasn't massively huge task, which in the end will be fulfilled. But to answer the question that is really the foundation of the arrangement of his papers as they are still here now.

Basically, start from zero

Yes

Whole job, even the paleography right?

Yes

Wow

They were more, at the time they were they found it easier, because everybody was still able to read the German, the old German current script and you can get into his handwriting, on his particular way of expressing things, so it's difficult it's much more difficult for us now than it was for them certainly.

Okay, so you say that some people were already working on some ideas to organize it, but the organization of the archive, like having a proper place in the institute, did it start with Joseph Trapp, or, do you know what was the impulse to give some place to the archive?

It was of course before my time but it's true, the first proper catalog was compiled by Joe Trapp and Anne Marie Mayer. He was the retired director then and she was a retired secretary then. They knew the works quite well and it must have been a

response to more and more demand in scholars wanting to see these papers, and that started to increase post 1970. Okay, the first compilation was in the, I think it was in the early 90's, so still 20 years later, but the interest in Warburg grew and grew over that period, and the origin of that interest one could say is really Ernst Gombrich *Intellectual biography* of Warburg, which gives a great insight into his papers because he quotes a lot from unpublished materials, and we only had the sort of collected works until then, but Gombrich gave us, one could say, a flavor of what else is there, and he quotes a lot and gives also archive references which are very rough and have little to do with what we have now because these are not really catalog numbers this is saying sort of, it was all kept in this so called 'Bing room' and it said like: coupled XYZ in 'Bing room', and 'that and that box'. So I presume by the round 1990 so many people, not that many but people came frequently wanting to see papers, it just made things easier to have a proper catalog. And that is still the basis of our current catalogue.

Oh great, so if I go to the *Intellectual biography* and I see 'Bing office', can I still access to the paper that is quoted there?

No, it's not, but we can, we usually know what it is and we've got a perfect catalog now, and once we have a bit of the title of one of these papers we can find out where it's catalogued now give you sort of, there is sort of concordance but actually, I now know the collection so well that I'm able to tell you which is now the catalogue number of that and that piece.

I imagine that's a huge work because for what I see is that there have been many different ways to sort of arrange the papers throughout the years. Dorothea McEvan was the archivist, and how can you say you've done different things from her?

So, she was my predecessor, she was actually the first archivist because the archive as a department, as a sort of one of the collections of the Institute didn't really exist before, it was just these two people, which is mentioned a Joe Trapp and Anne Marie Meyer looking after the papers, and sort of dealing with everybody who wanted to come and see something. And then came money, came funding, and a project, and Dorothea's big project was the catalog of the correspondence. In the end we had five different funders and it went on for 16 years, and the result is a catalog of almost 40,000 letters being electronically catalogued with an abstract, so that was her big project, and she was always funded through that project, so that is that is her life, life as an academic sort of legacy here, yes. So, and I came in as an assistant, and at the time I could see in all these years in which I've been here and then took over from her being in charge of the archives, how the interest in Warburg really grew and grew, and it got more and more international. So what we're doing, we're doing nothing really extremely differently these days, I think we're a little bit more generous with access to people. To have two people here at the time, that's as many as you can basically look after, and promote the collection a little bit more, going out, and improve the catalog so to make it even more and even better accessible, I think that's the sort of follow up, follow on formula work.

Yeah, because you talk about the letters, but as you mentioned there are so many notes, and

Yes the catalog existed or Warburg's papers but we've also revised it in recent years because the more you know about him and how he worked, and really know his project, the easier it is to come to identify things which have been cut a little lonely or have been, for example, I discovered a sort of a part of the collection which was always at the end of the catalog under 'miscellaneous' because nobody knew really what it was, and through my own work, through my own research I realized pretty quickly that this is part of the big unfinished project of route 1905 or 06 to write a major book which Warburg called *Die großes Buch* and always declared almost finished. [16:45] It probably wasn't, but it's a lot of material, which he sorted in materials, tables of content, and attempts to structure the materials he had collected, and already proper text. But he more or less abandoned that project once he had discovered this whole new field of astrology and astronomy. I should have said, that project was really about the development of style in *quattrocento* Florentine art, which mattered again and again and he never abandoned that project and it's the nucleus of the *Atlas* again in the 1920s, but he pushes it a little bit aside when he discovered this whole, sort of, or developed his interest in the afterlife of astrology, magic, magical practices and so on.

It's a conundrum of stuff right? Because you talk about the way that Warburg worked, as for projects, so he would have his notes, his texts, his bibliography, his pictures, his photographs... so of course in his mind, in this project they were all connected. Is there still to this day a connection between the library, the photographic collection and the archive?

Absolutely, because if we, I can say it for my own research, the archive is of course different as a department of the Warburg Institute because you cannot just walk in and sort of make your way through it and find whatever you need to look at. It's not an open access collection as is the library and the photographic collection, but his books are in the library and his photographs and the photographic collection, although these two collections of course have developed further, they are tools and there are tools to this day, whereas the archive is sort of frozen in time or at least by books papers in a way. But it's very exciting to go and sort of, if you dig yourself into one of his projects and as I usually do, try to reconstruct the genesis of his ideas, and then go to the library and look at the books he used, you can find that certain things are sort of marks in the margin, you find a few marginalia, you find his original photographs, and actually the recent *Atlas* exhibition is the best example because we dig out, I say we but not me personally, all his original photographs which were actually the objects which were attached to the panels in 1929. They probably all still exist somehow it's not clear, but few might have been lost, so I think about 85% were rediscovered and recovered from the photographic collection, but this is the stuff he had in his hands, but it is, it was a working tool, so quite a few of them were remounted, so we restored them to get this new mount off, to have them look as they used to look. And then his notes came off, sort of reappeared on the back of these photographs quite often, but other scholars had written on them too, so these packs are proper palimpsest, they reflect the history of this institute very well, like everybody who worked with that collection used that particular photograph, every

working tool, like Aby did at his time. So, the three collections are very much interconnected, and of course a library still has the order which was devised in Warburg's time with a few revisions over the years, but generally it's his it's still his library, just growing.

Yeah that's great, and is there also a link between the archive and the Warburg house in Hamburg?

There is a natural link, of course simply to the fact that that was the original House of the Warburg library, and we had yeah, we are in contact in a way, but not all the time. The funny thing maybe to mention, that few scholars from all over the world write to them thinking they are, that they must have the Warburg archive and so that's why I know the administrator there well, because she keeps forwarding things to me, but that's just a misunderstanding. Generally, they have, it's an empty shell in a way, or it's a shell which has been refilled with other things, it was bought by the city of Hamburg in 1992, and it was yeah, a lot of money was invested to make it look again as it looked in the 1930s or in 1926 when it was built, so it's now a nice location, a nice venue for small symposia, and people have their offices there who work on certain projects and they have invested money in building a few collections in there, they even have an archive over Warburgian scholar but they have nothing of the original content of course, so in a way there is always a connection but there is no strong

Sharing material?

There's no sharing in anything yeah, other than sometimes the collaboration really.

I see. And just talking about the increasing material of the archive now with the Warburg's Renaissance project, do you see any changes? Perhaps a bigger room?

No, we know exactly what's going to happen. Yes, because the project we're starting, we're going to decamp to move out in six months. The archive is one of the few departments, well actually the archive collection is, together with the photographic collections are the only collections which will move out of the building, whilst the library will stay here and partly open. Now we will move into the newly built area in the courtyards, so the whole building will get a makeover, but there will be a little part completely new build, and that's going to be in the courtyard, so we will be in what's called the lower basement in a completely new area there, and new special collections reading room will be built, which is then shared by the archive the photographic collection and the rare books. My office will be there, my colleagues' desks, like desks will be there, there will be a few desks for what we need desks to put out our materials, sort things and so on, there will be more readers desks than we now have, and we will have much better storage. So what is now the common room will be our storage room, we will have much better sort of stable temperature. So the really the conditions in terms of conservation will be much better much improved, and it will be a named reading room because of funders who wants to see their names in the new building, so yeah I'm quite excited, I'm quite looking forward to seeing what that will look like and how it's all going to work out.

That's nice! I imagine there will be even more collaboration or relation between the archive and the photographic collection perhaps.

Yes, we will see, we will see. Now of course there are floors between us but yeah, I'm curious.

Is great, and, is there any plan for digitalising more material?

There's nothing which I can say is a plan now which will be executed. Of course, digitization is always an option. We have this electronic catalog, the catalog in itself, its software gives us the option to attach digital files to what we've already catalogued. That said we have got the correspondence, every letter has an abstract, the abstract is of course quite nice for researchers because you can do a keyword search, you can search every keyword and the machine sort of search at this abstract and all sorts of other metadata. We could attach a sort of a photo of each and every letter. This of course with the correspondence problem of copyright, because we have the rights for Warburg but we don't have the rights for the other part; that is not a problem if these letters are sufficiently old, because normally 70 years: in this country it's 70 years, plus 40 in some cases, that's one problem, but that would be the easiest, just to attach the digital file. For all other digitization projects you really need cataloguers, you need people generating metadata, so we need to have more stuff. Of course, you could devise the project with thinking about possibly to digitize the *Zettelkästen*, hundreds of thousands of individual sheets, and it needs to be devised as a feasible project. So, it's an option but there's always oncost on that. We pay a lot of money for the software, which is sort of provided by a company, you pay maintenance fees, so it's not just that you raise money to digitize something you need to think a little bit further about to maintain all this digital data, and nowadays, like budgets are very very tight. So yeah, at the moment possibly, but not certainly I can't tell you which part of the collection will certainly be digitized.

Of course, and these are very difficult right? Because of their copyrights as you mentioned, when everything is online out there you don't know the use it can get, and you want to take care of the material, we were talking about paper...

Yes, and of course the paper will not sort of disappear, it's always sort of the original which will be maintained yes.

We were thinking about the wide diffusion of the material on the internet, is that something that you think it will be like a good

Yeah, diffusion or promotion, well yeah of course it has been pretty clear right, COVID has made clear how much demand there is to have access to documents not printed, right? so original documents in a digital format because people are traveling much less these days and may not be traveling as much as they used to because of what prices may increase there are all sorts of reasons why. Yeah, and there is the precedence in America, lots of archives have been digitized and basically put online, but it's a different country they have more private money I suppose, around, and the challenges are really there and I try to sort of pronounce

them just now. Of course, there will not be any other way than sort of making more and more and more things available digitally, and we have to think about strategies to do that, but uh it's going to be a major task, certainly.

Yeah, yeah not for the moment. So, more according to our project, the *Zettelkästen* what are they? What do they hold?

So, what they hold I would say, they are a sort of mirror of Warburg's life work. He started, it was a typical tool at the time, so he like end of 19 century that's what a scholar did, collecting sort of notes and mainly, I wouldn't say yeah maybe even mainly is correct, bibliographical notes. So whatever he came across, whatever title he came across, he thought which had some sort of relation to a topic it was interested in, he was working on, he would then note on a sheet of paper and put in one of the *Zettelkästen*, and the collection grew and grew, and it's about 100 boxes we have now. But he yeah, and they very much reflect perhaps they even reflect, in their order, and their titles, and their subsections, and sub connections, how Warburg sort of collected and a still life image of what the library looked like before it was more normalized when Saxl took over, took responsibility of the library, when the University of Hamburg, and was founded and Warburg's private library became a service library for the new university, and had to serve much broader fields, they would not abandon of course the idea of this sort of 'good neighborhood', 'good neighborliness' and the sort of strictly topographical order, but it was much more a collection according to Warburg's interests and research fields, and then Saxl gave it a whole makeup and said like, if we want to be publicly use library we have to sort of fill the gaps and basically have a broader spectrum. But the *Zettelkästen* of course remained Warburg's own collection, and so they have also notes, they have a lot of yeah, bibliographical material, but he would also put, for example, letters in there which you received on a certain topic was interested in or he was working on. We took these letters out because now we have a complete collection of correspondence. We took them out we put a copy of that letter in so we know where it was originally, but it now is part of the correspondence collection and can be searched through the electronic catalog of the correspondence.

Yes

So, yeah it's very much an image of Warburg's sort of research interests, but he was really struggling to find the right place for each and every sheet of paper and each and every collection of papers because everything of course is connected for him into this side, one single place or something, and then to have like a sort of yeah a visible interconnection, I think that was really giving him pain.

How have you sorted out that? How have you sorted those?

We have, they are catalogued but not every single sheet but only everything which has a sort of, it's a caption, starting with the caption on the box, and then they have little dividers, like in every box they are little dividers sort of giving these in Warburgs terms, sort of giving a name to the collection of sheets behind them; and as a third group he has little folders, and sometimes I would say a few sheets or a bunch of sheets, is again sort of a subsection of that section. And up to that

everything which has this sort of, is a caption we have cut like it's part of our electronic catalog, with Warburg's original terms. So you can see a rough structure of the *Zettelkästen*, then it helps researchers like, well that they can see all this section and then they can sort of go and look at what's really in there.

I see, now that you describe it, it doesn't look so different from the photographic material in the photographic collection.

It's true but the photographic collection, is of course, the order was devised post Warburg. It's very strictly iconographical, it's much more rigid than any system Warburg would have devised himself, like the *Atlas* it's not like, if you look at how Saxl then sort of device a few panels in memory of Warburg, where they were very rigid and stuff orderly, whereas Warburg's own panels look much more chaotic, and it's a bit like I would say the total collection of *Zettelkästen*.

I would say dynamic.

Yeah, yes yeah

Okay, so of course in the *Zettelkästen*, as the life of Warburg, they have information and material from the trip to North America, that trip also has some photographs, notes, some letters if we put it all together with just a topic. And I suppose this question is related to a former one about the problems of the use of the photographs from this trip, in place of course of the discourses and new things that we are living. Its photographs, which could be from the photographic collection but of course it's Aby Warburg's life so of course it belongs to the archive, is there some kind of politics that are facing...

Yes, this is very recent although there is a prehistory to that. So, the material, that it's a bit varied, it's what he collected on his trip, so we have little sketchbooks, notebooks, everything he collected on the trip, and there is actually a whole section also in his working papers there's one box in the *Zettelkästen* which he called 'Americana'. The books I think contain more than materials from the year when he digested the trip in 19 sorry in 1896 beginning of 97 when he really wanted to go a little bit deeper and was working on his theory of the creation of symbols the formation of symbols, that is what he wanted to get out of this trip, of that trip, of his experiences from the native Indian culture, sort of implementing his own theoretical work. But of course yeah he recorded many things, he recorded them by hand in sketches, he recorded them in their drawings, and in photographs; and this has been used over the time yeah his so-called snake dance lecture is his most famous text possibly, published posthumously, but the photographs got a little bit into the focus of the current Native Indians in North America when they were first published as a collection of his photographs in the 1990s I think in 1998 in a volume which came out in German and in English, and that sparked a discussion about the legitimacy to publish photographs which were taken partly with permissions partly without, but would show secret rituals of the Native usually, but in this case most of them are Hopi Indian rituals. And that this is a sort of yeah an intervention which had no permission, or if they had nowadays it wouldn't have been allowed anymore and that this is a violation of basically, it's a sort of typical western attitude of impropriation of something

which would have been and should have stayed secret. So, this dispute has a bit of a history. It started before my time here and then it got a little bit quiet about it again, and then the whole debate sort of got new momentum when we planned an exhibition at Boulder in Colorado where there are Indian faculty members, and in the end the whole exhibition was called off because they disapproved of exhibiting photographs which showed ritual dances. Warburg's cases it's Kachina dance which he observed and photographed. But of course, there are other things, it's not just the photograph of the dancers, it's also sketches of cosmological imagery, all things, I'm not a specialist of that, but I know that there is a group of materials, which is disputed, which should not be shown to a general public, which the Native Indians, the indigenous people think that's their secret property. These balls, not everything has this status, but some things are. And Bill Sherman, who now is the director of the Institute was sort of pushed a little bit into that debate, as there's currently an exhibition planned in Hamburg to show like an exhibition dedicated to Warburg's American trip at the museum which used to be the Volkerkunde Museum in Hamburg to which Warburg gave his collection of artifacts, so they hold them. And that collection was, yeah the idea was to put that back into the spotlight, to make an exhibition based on that, but also show materials from the archive from his trip, from the collection we hold, and because it's a museum or publicly funded museum in Germany they got in contact again with the Hopi council and had a long debate with them like what they would see as unproblematic and what they see as problematic, and yes, we take it from there, we are now we are now much more sort of, I say aware of the problem of the issues and at the moment we are not selling any of these books photographs for publication for example, and it's we're still in a debate about this, this is in front of us.

Yeah I imagine. At least you have selected the ones that are really problematic

Yeah, we know from those who were selected for the exhibition they all got a comment from the Hopi council saying like this is fine, this is not, so we know that yes.

That is great. It's good to know, you know what is possible to do and some direction. Well thank you very much for time talking with us about the archive.

Thank you.

And just one last question,

Yes

Would you offer a recommendation for scholar who wants to consult the material at the archive, how many days for example?

Yeah it depends completely that's our normal sort of service, that people who want to research you have an idea of what they, or a project nor just an idea, a project they get in touch with me or with my colleague, or through our general email. If they're planning a trip, and if we have space and can accommodate somebody, everybody is, who has a sort of a reasonable interest can come to do

research as long as you want and can afford it, and yeah we will reserve a desk. But you cannot just come, sometimes people come as readers of the library and think they can also consult some papers in the archive, it doesn't work like that you have to make an appointment. So, we need to know, because we need to sort of provide the service to get things out of the shelves.

And as you say, it's possible to see the catalog online so you have a rough idea...

That's only the correspondence catalog, our other catalog is still not completely finalized, we've got it on site, so the catalog of Warburg's papers and other catalogs of other collections, it will be up sooner or later. But if you have like anybody who has an interest, and usually people come from somewhere, they know something from the literature, and they know where they want to go. We also have some tourists say oh I only want to see the archive, that's not really possible, but I'm very happy to help, like if say I want to see this or that, or what do you have in that section, and so on and so on, so we have a correspondence and we figure out what's possible, so even without the catalog being online. I think nobody had a real problem with that so far.

Great it's good to know. Thank you very much Claudia, it was really nice talking to you.

Okay, thank you what's a pleasure.

So, until next time.

Ligas útiles.

Warburg Institute Archive.

<https://warburg.sas.ac.uk/archive/archive-collections>

Exhibition Aby Warburg: Bilderatlas Mnemosyne. The Original

https://www.hkw.de/en/programm/projekte/2020/aby_warburg/bilderatlas_mnemosyne_start.php

Das Museum am Rothenbaum – Kulturen und Künste der Welt,

<https://markk-hamburg.de/en/the-ceramics-of-the-aby-warburg-collection/>

Bibliografía mencionada.

Gombrich, Ernst. (1970). *Aby Warburg. An intellectual Biography*. London: The Warburg Institute, University of London.

Warburg, Aby. (2004). *El ritual de la Serpiente*. Joaquín Etoarena Homaeche trad. México: Sexto piso.