At first sight, classical architecture, with its continuous revivals and reworkings of the forms of Greek and Roman building, would seem to offer a privileged field to apply Aby Warburg’s central notion of the survival of antiquity and his view of art history’s unfolding as a process of remembrance, of *Mnemosyne*. Yet Warburg himself wrote very little on architecture, and after auspicious and impressive beginnings by Rudolf Wittkower, Richard Krautheimer, Georg Kubler, and Nikolaus Pevsner, the role of architectural history in the activities of the Warburg Institute, its Library and Journal, dwindled. A brief survey of the *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* shows that, up to the early 1970s, it published three to four articles on architectural topics every year. Among them are classics in the field that have kept their value to the present day, such as Wittkower’s articles on perspective and Palladianism, Robin Middleton’s article on Cordemoy, or Krautheimer’s on medieval iconography. Beginning in the mid-1970s, archi-

tectural contributions became less frequent, with an hiatus between 1992 and 2003. After 2003 architecture became incidentally present in the *Journal*, with very diverse contributions ranging from articles on the funding of Santa Maria Novella to Michelangelo’s design method in the Bibliotheca Laurentiana. The gradual subsiding of interest in architectural history may have to do with Wittkower’s departure from the Institute, but also with architectural historians working on classical and Renaissance architecture moving away in this period from an iconographical approach that was based on Warburg’s and Wittkower’s ideas toward other fields, such as patronage studies or the social and economic history of building.

The first decades of the Institute show an astonishing variety and scope of architectural studies, from Wittkower’s work on Renaissance proportion and perspective to early comparative studies on Western, Indian, or New Mexican architecture by George Kubler and R. A. Jairazbhoy; and from James Ackerman’s essay on Renaissance villas to Suzanne Lang’s early contribution to architectural reception studies. But can we speak of a Warburgian approach to architectural history? And if so, what is the role of the Warburg Library, in distinction to its founder’s thought? My argument is that the architectural history developed in the context of the Warburg Institute is distinguished by two, distinct features that can be connected respectively to Aby Warburg’s ideas on *Nachleben der Antike* and *Mnemosyne*, and to the organization and holdings of the Library. But I will also argue that Warburg’s own thought offers important, and hardly explored, starting points for new questions and investigations of the built classical heritage.

**Revivals of Antiquity on British Soil**

One of the first public activities of the Warburg Institute after its reopening in London was the exhibition “British Art and the Mediterranean World,” curated by Wittkower and Fritz Saxl. It was first shown in London in 1941, then toured the provinces. Publication in book form was suggested by a visitor, a Mr. Jarrold, who offered to publish it using a new printing procedure that would allow the reproduction of many (and large) plates at relatively low cost. The resulting book, which appeared in 1949, was very close to Aby Warburg’s image atlas *Mnemosyne*, yet also very different in a way that even then announced the divergence between


the Hamburg and London phases of the Warburg Institute. Physically, the volumes are very similar: the right hand page of the British volume offers a collage of images, recalling the felt boards in Hamburg on which Warburg used to pin the images whose connections he wanted to display (Figures 1 and 2); the left hand page has the accompanying text, varying from mere captions listing names, dates, places, and artists, to explanatory notes. The volumes also share a broad scope of subjects. Warburg included high art and popular visual culture, newspaper photographs, political propaganda, statues, film stills, and scrapbook fragments. At the time, this choice of subjects and material was very much at odds with academic art history, but it has become increasingly clear over the past decades to what degree Warburg’s global, anthropological interest in images announced present-day visual culture studies or Bildwissenschaft.

Saxl and Wittkower did not limit themselves to high art from antiquity and its various renaissances and revivals; they also dealt with Celtic transformations of classical forms; animal lore, botany, and astronomy; the revival of classical


mythology; humanistic scripts; the role of Flemish artists in the transmission of classical art to Britain; Sir Christopher Wren’s Roman sources for Saint Paul’s Cathedral; the strong influence of Michelangelo on British art; and the role of the neoclassical hall as a setting for sculpture and the precursor of many nineteenth-century museum displays of statues (Figures 3 and 4). “British Art and the Mediterranean World” thus addressed many of the themes that occupied Warburg. It also exhibited Warburg’s capacity to detect connections and continuities (for instance, the constant presence of Michelangelo in British art). But the manner in which these themes were treated had changed profoundly.

Warburg’s introduction to Mnemosyne (1927–29) is a profound meditation on the afterlife of classical art and memory. In the work of Renaissance artists—Pollaiuolo, Donatello, Michelangelo—attitudes, expressions, and gestures often figure that recall ancient statues, sarcophagi, or medals. Thus the drapery of Botticelli’s Venus recalls that of ancient maenads. Such interests raise fairly concrete art-historical issues of recognition, attribution, and artistic intention. What antique works did these Renaissance artists know? What did they borrow,
from whom, through what channels of transmission; and what artistic problem did they aim to solve by the employment of classical elements? For Warburg, such Nachleben became an issue with immense ramifications. He did not consider every reuse of classical elements but mainly what he called Pathosformeln: draperies, facial expressions, attitudes, or gestures that express strong emotions suggesting a living presence. By focusing on these elements, he introduced much wider methodological and cultural issues into the historical study of origins, transmission, influence, and the imitation or transformation of the classical heritage—issues
stemming from a Nietzschean view of the origins of art in Dionysian ritual as a way of taming primal fears and desires. The final formulation of Warburg’s ideas on Nachleben, in the introduction to Mnemosyne, shows that Nachleben had branched out from a way of thinking about the classical heritage and its revivals.

into a philosophy of history. In it, Warburg tried to preserve a precarious balance
between a rational attempt to understand the mechanisms and motivations of
these revivals as an artistic issue — that is, as an issue of representation and there-
fore of metaphorical character, at one remove from life’s fierce realities — and
an uneasy awareness of the uncanny continuing life of ancient art. Warburg
here conceived art history as remembrance, manifesting itself in the revival or
ongoing life of past art forms. If recollection is a storehouse, Nachleben is the pro-
cess through which it is filled.

With Mnemosyne, Warburg added a new chapter to the German historiographical debate on the nature of history and the past it records. In “Über die Aufgabe des Geschichtsschreibers” of 1822, Wilhelm von Humboldt had defined the task of the historian as the “Darstellung des Geschehens.” But das Geschehene — what took place — is not the series of acts and events that had made up the subject of the humanist historia rerum gestarum, but rather what connects them as an apparent unity, in a much more abstract sense — a set of inner causal connections. The events themselves are no longer the first objects of historiography, serving as a magistra vitae; the primary objects of historical interest are the form that inheres in the events, their causality. Similarly, Warburg’s aim, certainly in Mnemosyne, was not to collect individual cases of survival of classical art, but rather to understand the inner, for him psychological, mechanisms that form the hidden cause determining the process of Nachleben.

Nietzsche had added new zest to this debate by contrasting, in his second
Unzeitgemäße Betrachtung of 1874 (a text Warburg knew very well), monumental,
antiquarian, and critical history. All historiography ultimately serves the living.
Monumental history inspires and consoles the active man, fired by the ambition
for great achievements, and it changes life, by keeping alive the heroic endeavors
of mankind in the past. Antiquarian history serves life by preserving the condi-
tions under which the heritage of the past came into being, by carefully looking
after it; but it can only preserve the life of the past, not create new life, and it
has no sense, unlike monumental history, for what is new. Antiquarian history
thus threatens to suffocate the present and creates the need for a last variety of
historiography: critical history. In order to live, one has to forget and demolish

8. On German historiographical debates in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, particularly in relation to art and architectural history, see Mari Hvattum, Gottfried Semper and the Problem of Historicism (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 162–68; for humanist views of history, see Anthony Grafton, What was History? The Art of History in Early Modern Europe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), chaps. 1 and 2, and 123–41.
those recollections of the past that can no longer help the living. In its analysis of
history writing as a way of preserving the life of the past, but also of serving the
life of the present, and in its arguments against the indiscriminate conservation
of anything remaining, Nietzsche’s Unzeitgemäße Betrachtung provided much of
the conceptual scaffolding that would support Warburg’s practice of art history.
But reflection on Nietzsche’s opposition of monumental and antiquarian history
also helps to put the tensions and risks of Warburg’s project into stronger relief.
His introduction to Mnemosyne shows how his study of the revival of classical
forms could be transformed into a meditation on the origins of art and its role in
society. His ideas had become very close to those of Freud (in Totem and Taboo)
on the origins of society. But it was very complex to connect these ideas to actual
historical research into the transformations of classical forms. There is a gap
between antiquarian and critical history, on the one hand, and, on the other hand,
the gap between monumental history and the philosophy of art developed in
Geburt der Tragödie; and neither gap would be bridged by Nietzsche’s successors.
The metaphysical and anthropological aspect of Warburg’s thought disappeared
into the background, to be revived in the 1990s by Italian and French thinkers
such as Salvatore Settis and Georges Didi-Huberman.10

With the publication in 1949 of Saxl and Wittkower’s preface to British
Art and the Mediterranean, we encounter a very different atmosphere. Instead of
a metaphysical and psychological meditation on the nature and psychological
origins of art, memory, and the survival of forms and motifs from the past, the
authors offer a matter-of-fact account of the origin and aims of the exhibition,
recalling with discreet pathos the time of war “when the Mediterranean had
become a battle ground” and evoking the desires and hopes that at the time
were aroused by the “contemplation of the cultural relations of the past.” The
aim of this “kaleidoscopic survey” is not to present the visual laboratory that
Warburg worked in (together with a meditation on the metaphysics of remem-
brance or the origins of art in the primitive mind as founding mechanisms of
art history), but rather to present to the “retrospective mind” visual testimonies
of the debts of British art to Greece and Italy. The texts and plates show the
transformation of Greek and Roman forms; display sources for British artists in
Renaissance and Baroque art on the continent; and illustrate the formative role
of classical art on British taste and aesthetic thought, for instance in the develop-

10. Gombrich and Didi-Huberman represent the oppo-
site ends of the spectrum of Warburg interpretations:
Gombrich’s intellectual biography reduces the philosophi-
cal aspects and attention to the irrational that character-
izes Warburg’s thought; Didi-Huberman reads him as a
thinker on time and history. See Ernst Hans Gombrich,
Aby Warburg: An Intellectual Biography (London: War-
burg Institute, 1970); Georges Didi-Huberman, L’Image
survivante: Histoire de l’art et temps des Fantômes selon Aby
Warburg (Paris: Les Editions du Minuit, 2002); Claude
11–40; Salvatore Settis, “Kunstgeschichte als vergle-
ichende Kulturwissenschaft: Aby Warburg, die Pueblo-
Indianer und das Nachleben der Antike,” in Künstlerischer
Austausch—Artistic Exchange: Akten des XXVIII. inter-
nationalen Kongresses für Kunstgeschichte, ed. Thomas W.
Gachgens (Berlin: Akademie Verlag 1993), 139–58.
ment of the Picturesque or neo-Palladianism. But very little, if not nothing at all, is said about what became Warburg’s main preoccupation: understanding the reasons, the psychological and artistic processes, that lead to the Nachleben der Antike—which is not to say that Saxl and Wittkower’s exhibition was merely the symptom of a loss of intellectual ambition. On the contrary, metaphysical reflections on the general conditions of the possibility of art do not automatically lead to art-historical research programs. The exhibition can also be seen as a step in the very productive transformation of the Warburg from a laboratory or even a Denkraum—where ideas on the revival of antique forms were formulated by juxtaposing images on the famous felt boards—into a research library, devoted to charting the transformations of classical art and culture, and whose chief instrument increasingly became the book.

An Indirect Iconographical Approach to the Revival of Antiquity

The next major publication of the Warburg Institute, Wittkower’s Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism (1949), arguably the most influential postwar study in architectural history, shows another variety of this transformation of Aby Warburg’s philosophical considerations into a research program. Its main focus is no longer the transformations of classical art but, instead, the iconographical analysis of architectural form. Wittkower, like Nikolaus Pevsner, introduced German research methods into the British architectural-history scene, which until their arrival had been dominated by connoisseurs and critics such as John Ruskin, Geoffrey Scott, and Sir John Betjeman, or by architects like Harry Goodhart-Rendell. The Germans introduced systematic archival research and evaluation of sources, but also a question that had informed the rise of art history as an academic discipline in Germany from 1800 onward: should art history study art for its aesthetic value and its significance as an expression of the human mind—that is, be a branch of aesthetics—or should art history should model itself on the historical sciences and favor the factual description, based on documentary evidence, of styles, iconography, careers, oeuvres, and building histories, from design through execution, restoration, or ruin?


Wittkower’s *Architectural Principles* was a clear break from the traditional English view of Renaissance architecture, which was based on visual analysis and ultimately derived from Ruskin’s condemnation of Renaissance art as a hedonistic, academic, and pagan style, distinguished by its incapacity for formal or contructional innovation. Wittkower’s is an essay in architectural iconography, linking the formal motif of the centrally-planned church to worlds of theological and metaphysical ideas, and with a hitherto unprecedented scale and wealth of scholarly detail. Because of the connections it forges between architectural design, its significance, and the ideas behind it, the book signaled a new beginning in architectural history. It also represents a significant advance in knowledge about architectural thought in the Renaissance. At the same time, *Architectural Principles* comes at the end of a long tradition of books on architectural thought that influenced contemporary design. Hardly noticed, on its appearance in 1949, outside the scholarly community of Renaissance specialists, the book was taken up by architects and critics such as Le Corbusier and Colin Rowe, and had a huge influence on the turn of modernist architects toward proportion and anthropomorphy in the 1950s and 1960s (the Modulor is the best-known example).

Alina Payne has unearthed the modernist aesthetic bias in Wittkower’s appraisal of Alberti and Palladio; Christine Smith has questioned the universality and uniqueness of his views on mathematics as the dominant mode of architectural apprehension; and Matthew Cohen has shown that most of Wittkower’s ideas on Brunelleschi’s use of proportion are untenable and not based on actual, firsthand measurement of the buildings themselves. Nonetheless, *Architectural Principles* continues to exercise a great appeal for architects and architectural historians alike, because it offers a very concentrated and focused access into Renaissance architectural design and thought.

Wittkower’s book, although superficially very different in ambition and themes from Warburg’s study of the revival of antique art, actually provides an answer to a fundamental question raised by the revival of the antique, one that had already troubled Renaissance architects and viewers; that is, how to defend the use in Christian churches of pagan forms, in particular the architectural orders and elements of temples such as porticoes, with their strong associations with


14. On the reception of the *Architectural Principles*, see the preface to the 1988 edition; on Wittkower’s role in the 1951 Triennale, see Anna Chiara Cimoli, *La Divina Proporzione. Triennale 1951* (Milan: Electa, 2007), in which the original contributions by Wittkower, Ackerman, Giedion, Le Corbusier, and others are published.

pagan religion and society. Wittkower never raises this question explicitly, but he addresses its implications indirectly by condemning the views of his predecessors Ruskin and Scott, who believed that the very use of classical forms was proof of a return to antique paganism. Against them, Wittkower argues that Renaissance architects and theorists, from Alberti via Francesco Zorzi to Palladio, used pagan forms but endowed them, through their use of the centrally-planned church, with Christian symbolism. He traces the transformation of a classical motif—that of the circular temple into the circular Renaissance church, for instance from the temple of Hercules to Bramante’s Tempietto in Rome (Figures 5 and 6)—but he also shows the intellectual processes that led to the motif’s revival.

Architectural Principles could never have been written without the Warburg Library. E. H. Gombrich recalls how Wittkower used to leave the Institute late every night, loaded with Renaissance tomes; but the Library was vital also in a more fundamental way—because of its organization. As everyone who has ever used the Library knows, the open shelves ordering its holdings in four large categories (image, word, orientation, and action) force one to rethink the usual chronological, stylistic, iconographical, or genre categories of art-historical research. By its very organization, the Warburg Library also inspires one to ask
new questions that, in the case of architectural history, diverge completely from the traditional conceptual structure of the discipline. Architectural history is practiced mainly by architects. Starting with Vitruvius and continuing to the present day, architectural history to a considerable degree has been written by designers, who write the history of their art from the perspective of design issues. Architectural history was born in the Renaissance, when architects such as Alberti, Serlio, or Palladio began to reconstruct the ruins of Roman buildings; from the seventeenth century, it was taught in an institutional form at the Académie Royale d’Architecture in Paris and the Accademia di San Luca in Rome by and for architects; and the first incumbents of university chairs in architectural history were all architects.

But by its conceptual organization the Warburg Library moves away from design issues and instead includes architectural history and theory in a system of thought whose primary concern is not the decision making of the architect who has to solve a design problem, or the biography of a building from its commission to its design, building, use, and demolition. The roles that a building can play in

Figure 6. Donato Bramante, Tempietto, San Pietro in Montorio, Rome, c. 1502. Photo copyright Leiden University Digital resources.
society take center stage—both in a restricted Warburgian sense, as the manifestation of the revival of classical forms and as the stone embodiment of their remembrance, and also in a wider sense, suggested by the organization of the Library, as an agent in society, part of the same culture that also produced rhetoric or music, astronomy or the revival of ancient mythology. To do architectural research in the Warburg Library, therefore, always means to reshape the subject of one's inquiry in the terms that Warburg and his successors set out: to think of art not primarily in terms of its creation, material properties, dating, or stylistic history, but as an agent shaping culture. As Alberti put it in the prologue of *De re aedificatoria*, architecture is not only the setting for civic life, it also provides stone monuments to keep the collective memory of society alive. It is this profoundly humanist view of architectural history as monumental history that the Library embodies.\(^\text{16}\)

**Toward a Warburgian History of Architecture**

Still, Wittkower and his students by no means exhausted the potential of Warburg’s thought for architectural history. Warburg wrote little on architecture but was interested in it, as is shown by his involvement with the design of the Warburg-Haus in Hamburg, but also by the notes (of October 1890) that he made in the manuscript “Grundlegende Bruchstücke zur Psychologie der Kunst” about his reading of Gottfried Semper’s 1856 lecture on the “Formal Principles of Ornament.”\(^\text{17}\) They form part of Warburg’s efforts in these years to develop a theory of artistic expression, predicated on the conviction that representation is the locus of artistic freedom since it allows for a distance from the threatening aspects of images. (The motto he chose for these notes was “Du lebst und thus mir nichts.”) He shared this conviction with a series of late-eighteenth- and nineteenth-century architectural theorists, from Quatremère de Quincy via Bötticher to Schopenhauer and Semper.\(^\text{18}\) They all believed that aesthetic representation is the realm in which artistic freedom manifests itself and in which utilitarian artefacts are transformed into works of art. This transformation happens, for example, through a sculptor’s choice to use a material widely different from the

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being to be depicted—using cold, hard marble for a portrait bust, for instance, when soft ivory would feel, like a living body, warm to the touch. In architecture, it is ornament (and particularly the decorative forms derived from the classical orders) that play this role. They have no structural role but, instead, represent the tectonic forces at work in a building and thereby transform inanimate stone into a living work of architecture. In the words of K. G. W. Bötticher: “lautlos und starr, verräth sich Gedanke und Begriff nur durch characktervolle Zeichen.”

Without such forms, the way in which static forces work upon each other in a building would not be perceptible, and the building would seem dead. Art forms are the visual language of tectonic forms: they make a building speak. Semper pushed this line of reasoning even further, arguing that the outer shell of a building—its dress—fictionalizes it, dematerializes it, and by this means can animate dead matter.

Warburg shared with Bötticher, Semper, and Quatremère de Quincy an ambition to understand the forms of classical architecture exercise even fifteen-hundred years after the end of the Roman empire. Warburg was not interested in their potential as design solutions but in what they can tell us about the role of artistic representation in the development of human society and psychology. He was not consistent in the way he pursued this interest, but his all too brief remarks on architecture point in the same direction as his work on the visual arts. Both are integral parts of his effort to construct a new way of thinking about images, in the broadest sense of the word, and about their role in society, all over the world.

For the architectural historian, Warburg's ideas and the Library that grew out of them still offer ways of thinking about architecture as the expression and embodiment of cultural memory; reading Warburg and using his Library can aid architectural history to sidestep the focus on practical design issues that even now dominate the discipline. Warburgian ideas about the survival of classical forms have not yet received a systematic application or test in the domain of architecture, even though the ornamental, expressive formal repertoire of the orders seems to ask for analysis in such terms. Doing so would allow for a study of ornament that sidesteps the traditional dichotomy of utility and beauty, thus reducing ornament to the beautiful but useless, and would instead offer insight into the mental processes that lead to the use of such forms as a Denkraum—as the locus for artistic freedom.

Warburg's London legacy, as I have indicated here, contributed to the development of architectural iconography and to the study of the transformation of classical forms in building. The work of Wittkower, Saxl, and Krautheimer,

among others, opened up ways of pursuing the transformation of classical form while connecting it to the societies that produced these buildings. John Onians’s *Bearers of Meaning* of 1988, tracing the transformations of the meanings of the classical orders from antiquity to the end of the sixteenth century, is a new product of Warburgian architectural iconography. Alina Payne’s work on the adoption and transformation of Vitruvius by Renaissance architects and theorists, along with her forthcoming work on the topics of *Lebendige Architektur* and ornament in the nineteenth century, likewise show how Warburg’s ideas on the survival of classical form (and their renewal in the Warburg Library) have led to a variety of architectural history that uncovers the slow processes of transformation and renewal that are often hidden from sight by histories focusing on individual architects and their designs. Recently, Jan Assmann’s work on the role of memory in society has created a new wave of interest, across the humanities, in the cultural role of memory and its embodiment in texts, art, and architecture. Here too the Library has an important role to play: given the uniquely tangible ways in which the Library raises the issues of *Nachleben* and *Mnemosyne*, it is uniquely able to show, in concrete detail, how the formation of cultural memory actually works. The Warburg Library may be the embodiment in stone of its creator’s ideas, but it is at the same time so supple, inspiring, and interactive a living institution that it energizes the thinking of one new generation after another.