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Misconceptions and Misrepresentations of Aby Warburg's Art History

This contribution aims to point out two problematical viewpoints on Aby Warburg's conception of art. The first misconception regards Warburg as an iconographer, that is, someone who is pre-eminently preoccupied with the content, as opposed to the form, of a work of art. Warburg started out as a formalist historian of art: in his dissertation on Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* and *Spring* he foregrounded the so-called "nymph", a formal motif of a female figure in a flowing dress and with flowing hair, for which he found parallels in Poliziano's poetry, but what he was looking for was the textual parallel of the visual image, a verbal description that would correspond to Warburg's own observations about this female figure in motion, and not for an answer to the question of her identity and meaning. The second misrepresentation regards Warburg as someone who supposedly had a fragmented approach to art's history, who concerned himself only with particular and specific tasks and problems, as opposed to having grand and dangerous "Hegelian" visions of art's development (as Alois Riegl and Heinrich Wölfflin supposedly did), and as such he has been enthroned as a kind of a hero, a predecessor of the "new art history". Warburg was a private scholar and not a salaried university professor, he was able to keep the liberty of a wandering mind, he was not obliged to construct a system and/or a method for researching the history of art to be delivered to students. But in his work he was guided by a comprehensive conception of the history of art and culture nevertheless. Just as Riegl and Wölfflin did, he also believed that arts were forged and formed by worldviews, and ultimately he understood the development of European culture, in psychological terms, as one great evolution from magic to science, from cultic practice at the primitive beginnings to mathematical contemplation in the modern world.