THE WARBURG LIBRARY: MORPHOLOGY OF A LIBRARY AS A ‘LABORATORY OF THE MIND’

M. CRISTINA PATTUELLI
SCHOOL OF INFORMATION AND LIBRARY SCIENCE
PRATT INSTITUTE, NEW YORK

Aby Warburg (1866-1929) was a German art historian, the founder of the discipline known as ‘iconology’ for which his student, Erwin Panofsky, became famous, and a pioneer in the study of collective memory. His research interests were interdisciplinary and included a broad range of fields, from cultural history and archaeology to anthropology, ethnography, psychology and philosophy. Besides a highly influential body of work that is deemed to have changed the way we study art, Warburg also created the Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek Warburg (Warburg Library for the Science of Culture), a library dedicated to tracing the survival of classical images and symbols in European art and architecture.
throughout the ages. Initially developed as a private collection for his own scholarly purposes, the Library later became the heart of the Warburg Institute that opened to the public in 1926 in Hamburg, Warburg's hometown. With the rise to power of the Nazis, the Warburg Institute was transferred to London in 1933 and later incorporated into the University of London of which it is still part.¹

It has been argued that “... few great libraries mirror the mentality of their creators as faithfully and instructively as the Warburg [Library]...” (Marmor, 442). The Library was essential to Warburg’s intellectual life and its organizing principles reflect his conceptual system and method of inquiry, along with his ‘pedagogic ethos’ (Blunt, 1938). Scholars agree that the Library was his magnum opus (Levine, 2008) and the most complete embodiment of his intellectual aspirations. Along with his research, building the Library remained at the center of Warburg’s life for over twenty years. He was involved in every phase of its development, from reading trade lists and second-hand book-sellers' catalogues to assigning every book its place on the shelf (Bong, 304). Over the years the Library went through many changes, expanding to cover new subject areas, yet its organization continued to reflect and to adhere to Warburg’s research interests, his line of inquiry, and his method of work.

While the interest for Warburg’s scholarly work continues to grow, systematic studies on the Warburg Institute Library are still scarce. Fritz Saxl, his first library assistant, and an art historian, and Gertrude Bing, who succeeded Saxl in overseeing the Library, provide vivid accounts of its birth as well as Warburg’s

¹ http://warburg.sas.ac.uk/library/.
consuming passion for acquiring and arranging books (Saxl, 1970; Bing, 1934). More recently, Salvatore Settis (1985) and Tilmann von Stockhausen (1992) have provided descriptions of the library’s conceptual and physical arrangement, while Mari Friman et al. (1995) and Catherine Minter (2008) have written about the unique classification system.

**ORGANIZATION OF THE LIBRARY**

**BACKGROUND**

The decades surrounding the turn of the century, when Warburg was building his library, witnessed numerous changes in the theory and practice of librarianship, including growing trends toward professionalization and standardization (Minter, 2008); Wisser, 2009). These developments were manifest in the debate over how best to organize library materials. One of the most popular organizational systems was “systematic” classification, in which bibliographic materials were arranged according to a complex hierarchy of disciplinary classes and sub-classes. One example of this approach was the Dewey Decimal system, developed in the 1870s, which was based on ten predetermined classes conceived as pigeonholes (Olson, 2001, p. 652). Others preferred the more efficient “practical” classification system, where books were arranged by general subject, but were then sub-classed according to alphabetical order or accession number, rather than by sub-disciplinary categories (Sayers & Maltby, 1967).

While Warburg must have been aware of such debates, which were especially heated in Germany at the turn of the century, his interests lay mainly
outside the organizing principles of modern librarianship. He was certainly opposed to the “practical” approach that allowed scholars to quickly target and retrieve materials, but limited serendipitous discovery via shelf browsing. As for the “systematic” approach, Warburg would not have supported its view of the library as a static model of the universe of knowledge to be constrained by external fixed structures. Such a vision conflicted with Warburg’s idea of the library as an interdisciplinary and dynamically growing organism. While there was never an explicit theorization of the underlying organizing principles, the library Aby Warburg was developing was driven, not by the desire to adhere to external professional standards, but by internal forces that sought to create dynamic “fields of exploration” (305) through the constant re-organization of books. As Saxl described in his memoir, Warburg himself continuously rearranged his books according to the evolution of his research and system of thought.

In its unconventionality, the Library both informed and mirrored Warburg’s intellectual effort to define a new perspective and methodology for the study of works of art. Specifically, the Library reflected and supported the birth and the evolution of the “science without a name,” as Warburg referred to the emerging discipline known as iconology, a perspective that would challenge the Western European emphasis on a purely formalist approach to art history, as exemplified in the writings of Heinrich Wölfflin (D’Alleva, Methods & Theories of Art History, pp. 21-22). In stressing the importance of ‘content’ rather than mere form in interpreting a work of art, iconology forged new paths of ideas and areas of
knowledge that incorporated symbolic material, religion, myth, literature, politics, and even astrology as part of the study of art history.

This interdisciplinary approach required Warburg to adopt a flexible arrangement for his library that would help create and display unconventional connections between materials. One of the ways in which this was achieved was the simple, inherently elusive, yet influential organizing principle known as the law of the good neighbor.

“LAW OF THE GOOD NEIGHBOR”

The law of the good neighbor was based on the idea that the proximity of certain books to others creates associations and produces dynamic maps of meaning. As Saxl wrote: "The overriding idea was that the books together--each containing its larger or smaller bit of information and being supplemented by its neighbors--should by their titles guide the student to perceive the essential forces of the human mind and its history." In other words, by creating a synaptic order between books as units of knowledge, the law of the good neighbor encourages associative thinking and facilitates what Bing (1934) labeled the “discovery journey”, the phrase used to describe the experience of browsing and finding information serendipitously (Stokhausen, 1992).

Arranging books in ways in which they would “speak to one another” also broke down disciplinary boundaries. As we have seen, Warburg’s approach to research was inherently interdisciplinary. He strove to place works of art in a broader socio-cultural context based on the idea that art is an integral part of life
and can only be understood in its entirety through its interaction with other subjects including myth, religion, magic and astrology. In this way, as Bing observed in 1934, the Warburg Library represented, in many ways, a return to the older idea of the library as a “Universitas Litterarum” (264). Although it is impossible to say for certain whence Warburg got the idea for his system, Saxl drew a connection to the University of Strasbourg library, where he studied, which contained various open-shelf subject collections in the same building, allowing the reader to make associative connections as he wandered from art to religion, from religion to literature, from literature to philosophy (326).

It was precisely this errant wandering that Warburg sought to encourage in the users of his library. An illuminating anecdote recounts Ernst Cassirer’s first visit to the library in 1920 as a newly hired art historian at the University of Hamburg. After his visit, led by Fritz Saxl, Cassirer described the “danger” of the library, a “labyrinth” which he must avoid completely or else become imprisoned within its walls for years, wandering from treasure to treasure as if in a goldmine (Landauer, 1984).
CLASSIFICATION SCHEME

While the law of the good neighbor was the intrinsic force and guiding principle of the Library, some kind of classification scheme was needed when the Library was transformed from a private collection to a public research center (350,000 BOOKS). Prior to that point, the library's bibliographical arrangement had been defined by its lack of systematization. As we have already seen from Saxl's memoir, Warburg was perpetually engaged in shifting and re-shifting his books in accordance with the various directions that his scholarship was taking. While this unconventional system effectively served Warburg's private needs, it was hardly conducive to facilitating outside scholarship. The problem was that no existing classification system was suitable because of the peculiarity of the library's aim to bring together as much
diverse information as possible to bear on the specific problems associated with the transmission of Classical tradition through modern times in its many manifestations. It needed not only to offer the essential materials to the researcher, but to also present them in ways conducive to finding books and ideas that may have been unexpected or unfamiliar. Any rigid disciplinary classification would have hampered this rich potential for discovery.

Aby Warburg and Fritz Saxl, in collaboration with Gertrude Bing, the new assistant at that time, opted for arranging books and offprints (articles were displayed on the shelves along with the books) thematically in a subject-order intended to facilitate cross-disciplinary research. The scheme was characterized by a flexible form that allowed for sub-sections to be easily changed without causing any negative impact on the general order of the books. While the system did not make the finding of specific materials any easier, “the books remained a body of living thought”, as Warburg had planned.

Four broad subject divisions – Image, Word, Orientation, and Action - provide the overarching framework and embody the mission of the Library as well as the intent of its founder. These four categories were physically displayed on the four floors of the building where the Warburg Institute was located in Hamburg and they have been maintained in the current location in London.
The books housed on the first floor were related to the category of IMAGE, the focal point of Warburg’s inquiry. The sub-divisions of archaeology, aesthetics, topography and iconology all occupied the first floor of the Hamburg building, exactly as they do now in London under “Art and Archaeology”.

The second floor was dedicated to WORK and included books on language and literature focusing on the preservation and transition of classical literature.

ORIENTATION was located on the third floor and covered the sections of Religion and Philosophy. Religion spanned from early Christianity to the Counter Reformation and the Philosophy included Classical mythologies.

ACTION was the category housed on the fourth and last floor. It centered on social forms of human life, e.g. history, law, folklore, etc. and addressed the survival and transformation of ancient patterns into social customs and political institutions.
The theme of the survival of antiquity and the renewal of the classical past over the centuries provides the connective strand that underlies and unifies the design of the Warburg Library system. Approaching the library’s conceptual structure and physical plan as an epistemic cartography, the researcher would be able to investigate the process of transmission of classical tradition from the perspective of the visual symbols and images in European art and architecture (1st floor), in Western languages and literature (2nd floor), to analyze magical beliefs and their transition to religion, science and philosophy (3rd floor) and their influence on social behavior and political actions (4th floor).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Since we have a little extra time I’d like to end with some considerations from a librarian’s professional point of view. As libraries struggle to find new strategies for organizing digital information, Warburg’s guiding principles and methods are striking for their modernity. Indeed, the advent of the digital age provides a new lens for understanding their value and usefulness. Rethinking the Warburg Library model in light of today’s information environment offers an opportunity for a completely new stream of research that, as far as I am aware, has not yet been conducted.

A few elements stand out that were an integral part of the Warburg Library system and are now key in digital libraries and web-based information systems in general: First, the powerful function of browsing that has only recently begun to be
incorporated into library catalog interfaces like WorldCat\textsuperscript{2} to facilitate exploratory search; Second, the fluid, hypertextual nature of digital resources allows for the effortless crossing of disciplinary borders, recalling Warburg's constant shifting and re-shifting of books. In both cases, the juxtaposition of heterogeneous materials is channeled to create new configurations of meaning and to suggest new trajectories of interpretation. Finally, the Warburg Library, that never relied on any rigid hierarchical order where everything has its own permanently assigned place, embodies the idea that everything is miscellaneous as David Weinberger (2007) has defined the digital order of information we experience today [...].

\textsuperscript{2} http://www.worldcat.org/.
REFERENCES


