

**Karen Michels.** *Aby Warburg: Im Bannkreis der Ideen.* Munich: C.H. Beck Verlag, 2007. 128 pp. EUR 19.90, cloth, ISBN 978-3-406-55885-6.



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**Commissioned by** Susan R. Boettcher

Karen Michels's *Aby Warburg: Im Bannkreis der Ideen* is a brief, easily read book that mixes a personal and intellectual biography of this innovative art historian and multifaceted scholar with an institutional history of the research library that he organized in Hamburg in the first decades of the twentieth century with the financial assistance of his family of bankers. Clearly a labor of love by people who have focused on Aby Warburg throughout their careers, the book is handsomely designed and printed on fine paper. It includes many high-quality reproductions of personal photos, photos of the Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek Warburg, and, perhaps most interesting, pictures of the archives and of a few primary documents. The volume may be a worthwhile read for scholars or students who desire a quick introduction to Warburg and his research in classical and Renaissance culture. His engagement with the cultural politics of early twentieth-century Germany, specifically his very important involvement with modernist art criticism in Germany, also receives some attention that, while not theoretically ex-

ploratory, is nicely located in the context of Warburg's engagement with decidedly non-modernist Hamburg tastes. The book is at its best in the chapters that describe Warburg's developing, prolific, and often unfinished research projects and his efforts to amass materials at his library in Hamburg. These sections provide scholars with numerous hints about possible research projects in the Warburg archives, including such things as a historical and comparative study of postage stamp iconography and an extensive collection of all manner of published materials related to World War I that Warburg assembled and organized during the war years.

Written and designed in a celebratory and reverent style, the book seems to have been intended as promotional literature for Warburg studies at the Warburg Institute in London, where the bulk of the archive has been located since 1993, and for the Warburg Haus, the restored library building in Hamburg run by the Warburg-Stiftung since 1993. At times the author seems to be courting academics with interesting observa-

tions about the contents of the archives, but a critical analytical approach is lacking. The author and the contributor to the foreword, Martin Warnke, make so much of the wondrous things that resulted when Aby Warburg's banker brothers entrusted him with their financial capital that the book seems to have wealthy philanthropists as one of its target audiences. To the extent that the book advances an analytical position, it is that Aby Warburg was a great figure who poured his life into his work and who is deserving of more attention from academics and more financial support from patrons of the arts and culture.

The strength of the book lies in the intimate relationship of its contributors with the Warburg archives and the Warburg institution and family. The best chapters look at Warburg's specific research interests and the ways he amassed and organized materials to pursue them. The chapter on his study of the material conditions that promoted the Renaissance in Florence is especially interesting. Warburg connected that phenomenon to the one he was experiencing personally in Hamburg, where he felt engaged in what he hoped was a cultural rebirth supported by the wealth of a prospering trading city. The closing chapter is also especially interesting, with its discussion of the postage stamp project and Warburg's ambitious and unfinished *Bilderatlas* of ancient civilization. Chapters on school and military service mention Warburg's encounters with antisemitism on the one hand and his efforts to distance himself from his orthodox upbringing on the other, but the brief discussion offers no surprises to a scholar of the period. Chapters on the design and organization of the research library are interesting in the way they reveal the innovative thinking of this art historian, who was perhaps most groundbreaking in the ways he saw connections, interchanges, and influences across time and geography. I recommend this book only to readers who wish to avail themselves of the positive aspects of the book that I have highlighted or who are seeking a

quick and unchallenging survey of Aby Warburg's life and work.

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