



## A study on the thought of Aby Warburg's art imagology based on "emotional program"

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**Abstract:** Aby Warburg's last work, *The Atlas of the Goddess of Memory*, is a large-scale atlas that aims to study the rebirth of "cultural memory" in ancient Western times amid the continuous flow of images in later times. It has attracted many followers and researchers because of the diversity of images selected and the openness of analysis methods. *Pathosformel* (also translated as "passion form") is a unique concept developed by Warburg, which is an image program with polar emotional energy, used to describe the original memory of the character's actions and expressions as a specific formula that has been repeated in history. This paper tries to interpret some of the images in the *Atlas of the Goddess of Memory* by centering on the concept of "emotional program".

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German art historian Aby Warburg (1866-1929) was an art historian, but because of the uniqueness of his research method, he was not limited to the discipline of art history, but used his own method of opening images to create a nonlinear and groundbreaking art history for us. Warburg spent most of his life using the medium of images to awaken the life energy of art in time and space. His method of gathering and juxtaposing visual literature according to different themes, exploring the extraordinarily complex and hidden inner connections between images, condenses into the result of all his emotions and thoughts in the last five years of his life, the *Atlas of the Goddess of Memory*.

### 1. The origin of *Atlas of the Goddess of Memory*

In ancient Greek mythology, Mnemosyne, the mother of the MUSES, was defined as the goddess of memory. Today, not only does Mnemosyne's name appear on the lintel of the Warburg Library, it is also the name of the vast collection of myths that this article seeks to explore. Warburg took the Mnemosyne Atlas as an important project in his later years, rearranging and combining the image text of various works of art from different eras, different places and different media of expression. Through the deep emotional connection established by gestures and expressions, the author tries to find the ways in which images with symbolic, symbolic and passionate power are reproduced in different periods of ancient and

modern times, and tries to find the internal connection between them, and discusses how to get rid of the spiritual dilemma of people in the crisis era.

Warburg's early focus was on Renaissance Florentine art, in which he found the struggle between the forces of reason and passion evident, and he hoped that the Mnemonia would allow people to experience the power of this "polarity" in the history of Western images. Warburg believed that these images, juxtaposed in a certain order, could depict images of what he called "bewegtes Leben" (life in motion or living life). Warburg allowed the atlas to create a dynamic "Denkraum of ideas," a vast atlas in which Western culture can be revealed by the tension shaped by emotion and reason.

"Warburg found writing a very painful task... It was increasingly vexing to have to express his thoughts in a single narrative. ... Even in his early notes, Warburg liked to map out these complex relationships in schematic form. 1 Every image in the atlas seems to be filled with conflicting and contradictory forces, and the same "form of feeling" means liberation in one respect and degradation in another, so that Warburg has great difficulty in expressing his complex conception of history in words. He had intended to publish this particular set of material in a proper form, but he abandoned this intention after many years of effort. Warburg's introduction to the *Atlas of the Goddess of Memory* is short and difficult to understand, and

he does not explain the specific contents of the Atlas. Due to the huge project, the original restoration of the Goddess of Memory Atlas has not been fully completed. Many rare images have no clear provenance. Researchers interested in the Atlas can only dig into the essence of Warburg's thought through the Atlas of the Goddess of Memory, published in 2000 by the German art historian Martin Warnke, based on the "last edition" of the atlas. In the absence of text interpretation, through the arrangement of images and the content of each image, the theme and point of view that Warburg wants to convey are analyzed and studied. Many scholars who are interested in iconography have tried to seriously study this problem in order to interpret Warburg's "image gap".

## 2. The interpretation of "emotional reading program"

The term *Pathosformel*, coined by Warburg himself, refers to the formal nature of emotional expression. The Atlas of the Goddess of Memory can also be said to be "an atlas in the form of emotional thoughts". It is obvious that the "form of feeling" is related to two factors of feeling and form, which have a lot to do with Warburg. Warburg had an illness when he was a child, and after that he was mentally fragile, and the doctors were strict that he should not be too excited. Gombrich wrote in his biography that "it was clear that young Abbie had learned to use this to protect himself, as a shield when his siblings threatened him with punishment." In addition, when he was a teenager, his mother fell seriously ill while the family was staying in the Austrian resort of Ischl. <sup>2</sup> This injury profoundly affected Warburg's early life. For the young Warburg, this sad event was mitigated by two events: a nearby grocery store where he ate sausage for the first time, and a nearby library where he read stories full of Indians. These two events apparently provided relief from the despairing feelings that had found outlet in daydreams. It's a strategy for dealing with brutal reality. This early experience also seems to hide the parable of Warburg's life. His pursuit of cultural knowledge became an important mitigating factor in his constant struggle against overheated emotions. As an adult, he was often troubled by his sensitive and violent temper. Warburg's "sentient form" is somewhat similar to Jung's "archetypal memory", but Warburg was in fact influenced by Richard Semon's concept of "engram", which corresponds to Warburg's definition of "symbol with memory".

The year 1905 is considered to be the moment when Warburg's thought received a major boost: he turned from Burckhardt's approach to the study of cultural history to the perspective of historical psychology, and first proposed the concept of the "sentimental program" in his paper *Durer and Italian Antiquities*. In it, he discusses the pictorial representations of the "death of Orpheus" by northern and southern artists of the Renaissance, which Warburg describes as a truly archaeological "sentimental formula" "whose vitality has taken root in the circle of Renaissance artists". <sup>3</sup> He understood art as the expression of the passionate form bearing the energy of life and culture, the replacement of the energy of life in a symbolic way, which is the continuation and preservation of the original things of human life, which is the polar composition of art. Warburg calls it "*Pathosformel*", "pathos" is not calm emotion, but passionate, suffering, conflict of life energy, is the polarity of the code to preserve the cultural memory presented; "fomel" is also different from other "forms" in the period when Warburg proposed this concept. It is a "polar" program. The passionate and dynamic forms of postures and movements that repeatedly occur in the history of art convey the ancient cultural memory of mankind.

Warburg argues that the emotional program is, first of all, the original experience of life or mental coping in a particular agitated situation, and that the historical image is only a symbol of it, an empathic bet of the original experience on an object (a dress of motion or a particular gesture). And the emotional program always appears as a "remnant" of experience at the edges of the image, flashing back in the "edge", it is rarely thematized or even motivated, nor adequately explained in terms of the content/form of the image, as described by Giorgio Agamben (1942 -), in Warburg's emotional program, Emotional energy and graphic programming are so inextricably intertwined that it is "impossible to distinguish content from form." <sup>4</sup>

The concept of "sentimentality program" also has the shadow of Nietzsche's thought. Nietzsche described the life force of ancient Greek people with the dualistic impulse of sun God and Dionysus, while Warburg believed that human emotions are bipolar. "Sentimentality program" is the image program of emotional energy with polarity, and emotional energy always swings between the two poles during the

accumulation and release of history. The two polarities of emotional energy constitute a powerful tension, resulting in two special emotional programs in art: Apollonian rational calmness and Dionysian passionate intoxicant programs. Warburg noted gender differences for two types of emotional programming: the soulful Nife and the mournful river God. Nife is a feminine emotional program that takes the form of an appendage in motion, meaning clothing or hair; The river God is a masculine emotional program, and its expression is the body in motion, that is, the gesture or gesture, which is highlighted in the image as the gesture of grief, raw power and pathetic action.

### 3. The presentation of "Emotional program" in the Atlas

#### 3.1 The Passion Program: Laocoon's pain unfolds

Lessing's Laokong has been the focus of Warburg's research, and later became the central theme of his final project, The Goddess of Memory, "pathosformmel" originated from theorists such as Winckelmann and Lessing's concern and inquiry into the pose, movement and intense emotion of the figure in the moment of the artwork. Several plates in the Atlas have Laocoon themes, the most notable of which is plate 41a (Figure 1), with the theme "Leidwnspathos, Death of the priest". The 41a plate consists of 22 drawings, most of which are paintings, showing Laocoon's tragic posture and painful expression in different forms. These tragic symbols are also the core of the study of the Atlas.



Figure 1. Panel 41a

The convergence of Laocoon images as tragic symbols on plate 41a also marks Warburg's concrete transformation of the concept of snakes, and he has described the Laocoon group sculptures as tragic symbols transformed by the destructive power of snakes in his lectures on the snake dance ceremony. Contrary to Winckelmann's belief that Laocoon represented quiet greatness, Warburg saw it as the priest's painful memory of dying. The passion of Dionysus and the serenity of Apollo, the god of the sun, coexisted from the classical era to the Renaissance and even to the modern era. The symbolic form of this binary opposition also influenced the change of the expression style of life movement in the Renaissance.

Curiously, the Laocoon engravings unearthed in the 16th century do not appear on plate 41a, but on plate 6, a symbol of plunder and sacrifice. Plate 41a cannot be summarized solely by the survival and resurrection of Laocoon as a symbol. The problem expressed by the pagan style of intense movement and painful emotions in the plate is the passionate program of Dionysian.

With regard to the intense posture of the priest's death, the expression of struggle, the ancient costumes, and the fluttering ribbons, human emotions, that is, "feelings", are in a state of intense intensity. The painter's depiction of gestures and movements is a polar pattern, which is the primitive passion that people burst out when they are subjected to intense emotional impact. Warburg pays more attention to the expressions and expressions of the characters in the images, which can highlight the intense inner feelings of the characters (FIG. 2 and 3). The mockups of Panel 41a drive away the archetypes with a conquering rhythm, indicating that the sentimental program based on Laocoon's archetypes has gained new vitality in the Renaissance humanities and art circles.



Figure 2. Panel 41a-4



Figure 3. Panels 41a-6

### 3.2 Nymph, the sprightly fairy

As mentioned earlier, the expression of the feminine emotion program is a fluttering female dress or hair. Warburg believes that the figure that best embodies this emotional formula is the fairy Nymph. The image of Nympho is one of the themes that runs through Warburg's academic career and is epitomized in plate 46 of the Atlas. Agamben believes that, in fact, Mannemosyne is the biggest Nifu, and in the Atlas, the little Nifu of countless images converge into this huge Nifu of Mannemosyne.

"Who is Nife, and where does she come from?" In 1900 Warburg gave a pontifical and even superficial answer to this question: "As a real being of flesh and blood, she may be a slave freed from Tartary... But in her true nature she is an Elementargeist, an outcast pagan goddess..." 5 The term "elemental spirit" clearly refers to the romantic tradition, and the definition "an outcast pagan goddess" has attracted much scholarly attention - Nife is depicted in most appropriate

contexts for Warburg's study of the life persistence of pagan deities. In the little book "Nife", Agamben interprets the element spirit corresponding to Nife in Paracelsus' article: Nife (water demon) corresponds to the element of water... They have no soul, because they are neither human nor animal (because they also possess reason and language), nor are they fully spiritual (because they have bodies). They are higher than animals and lower than humans, a mixture of spirit and flesh, they are pure and absolute "creatures." 6

As early as his doctoral thesis on Botticelli's paintings, Sandro Botticelli's "Springtime" and "Birth of Venus" Antiquarian Ideas in the Early Italian Renaissance, he described Botticelli's female figures as Nife. Influenced by Poliziano's parody of Homer's Hymatics and Alberti's essay on Painting, Botticelli turned his attention to the imagery of breezy hair and flowing clothing. The flowing hair of the female figure and the moving clothes, in addition to being the obvious features of Botticelli's work, were also the main source of inspiration for Warburg's emotional programming. These classical goddesses painted by Botticelli in Springtime (Figure 4) and the Birth of Venus (Figure 5) were interpreted by Warburg as "Nympho formulas".



Figure 4. Sandro Botticelli, Springtime



Figure 5. Sandro Botticelli, The Birth of Venus

What is important here is not the reproduced objects themselves (hair, clothing),

but their fleeting movement or dynamics, the capture of this dynamic by the image, because this unsolidified state is precisely the symbol of antiquity and its life energy. They are really feminine "love programs." 7 Warburg believes that the presentation of Nympho's image is the image projected on the emotional program, just like Botticelli's painting of her, dreamlike beauty and stirring emotions are conveyed through static images and dynamic hair and clothes, and the flowing hair and clothes provide us with a path to understand the creator's feelings.

The Nympho of Sentient programming is what Plate No. 46 is devoted to, and this plate contains 26 images, not to be overlooked is Plate 6.1 (Figure 6) The Birth of St. John by Domenico Ghirlandaio, which is also the most important painting in Plate No. 46. The maid on the right side of the picture is holding the fruit bowl on her head with her right hand and holding the kettle in her left hand. Her right foot is moving forward, the sole of her left foot is off the ground, and her clothes are flying, showing a dynamic, fluttering and light situation. This woman is the embodiment of the pagan fairy Nife in Warburg's consciousness. Although her identity in the painting is a maid carrying goods, her ethereal and agile figure is more like a modern person with a strong sense of individuality and eager to get rid of some kind of bondage than the dignified female figures of the same period.



Figure 6. Domenico Ghirlandaio, The Birth of St. John, fresco

In addition to carrying objects, Nife in other paintings in the plate also presents a gesture of offering gifts. For example, in Botticelli's "Venus and the Three Graces Offering Gifts to a young Girl" (FIG. 7), the goddesses gave the girl their own beauty, wisdom and love in a gesture of offering, and the girl also left the impression of lightness and joy in pursuit of herself. In addition to the offering gesture, there are also

figures in the paintings that show Nife as the giver of the introduction action and the bearer of the information of conception. From the bearer of specific objects to the bearer of information and life, Nife has different faces, while the gaps in the pictures convey deeper meanings.



Figure 7. Sandro Botticelli, "The Three goddesses of Venus and Graces Present a Gift to a Young Girl"

At the time, women were still considered immodest if they walked briskly and raised their arms too high. It is in this context that Warburg's response to images of fast-moving women must be seen. In various drafts, he referred to the "fairy" as a beautiful butterfly that he could not catch. His central theme is always the liberation of beauty. Gombrich also argues that the classical urge to express postures and swift movements is no longer a literary problem: people see it as a liberation from monotonous naturalism, as a safety valve from which passion can be continuously tilted... The "fairy" can be a symbol of liberation and liberation. 8

The vivacious and ethereal gestures of the above-mentioned Nymphs as pagan spirits destroyed the solemn atmosphere of Christianity, For example, some pictures of the Torboni family in the plate show that the members of the family acted in miracle plays representing Christian stories, and Giovanni Torboni made reliefs showing pagan content to express the grief of his wife and placed them in the tomb of a Christian church, which can also be perceived as having some blasphemy meaning that is different from Christianity. These gestures and behaviors are the embodiment of the Dionysian spirit, and also the expression of getting rid of the dull and rigid religious bondage through the image of Nife. Warburg saw in "the Fairy" raw feelings erupting through the self-restraint of Christianity and the proper shell of the property-owning class. 9

#### 4. Conclusion

Warburg's concept of art is opposed to the theory of artistic style, and he pays more attention to the cultural memory value of works of art and the gap between images of different periods. The Atlas of the Goddess of Memory is a collection of works that bring together human emotions and raw memories, and the images in the plates show ancient emotions in a dynamic, passionate and energetic way. Although Warburg pioneered the specific application of emotional programming in art history and iconography, he opposed a single, unchanging emotional programming, and he always advocated a creative and dynamic emotional programming. In general, Warburg retains a highly idealistic standard of judgment: Warburg's emotional program is a long lens that shows culture and the motifs of life. Classical mythology, as illustrated in this illustration, is reinvigorated by the collision with the passionate human formula.

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