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ABY WARBURG'S ARRAS A FLORENTINE CONSTELLATION TAKING

When the grandiose construction conceived by Fritz Schumacher for the Hamburg School of Applied Arts at the Lerchenfeld opened its doors a hundred years ago, and the new workshops had been set up, the upper parts of the walls in this aula still comprised a white expanse. Yet the architectural composition of this spacious room was designed for being decorated with a monumental painted frieze. At the time of the inauguration, the plans for this project were already at an advanced stage. The head of the class for figurative monumental painting, Willy von Beckerath, had presented a number of drafts; and a group of private investors in the circle around the Hamburg scholar of art theory and cultural science Aby Warburg was willing to financially support their realization. The fact that the cycle of paintings could only be inaugurated four and a half years later, namely in March 1918, was not due to miscalculations or planning errors, as these are customary practice today, but was rather caused by the beginning of the First World War.

The frieze had already gained ample shape, when Beckerath in August of 1914, only shortly after the German declaration of war, was prompted to vacate the aula and his studio for

the building's utilization as a hospital.¹ For this reason he was only able to complete his painting in early 1918.

Through the incursion of the historical reality of the time into the history of art, the wall frieze created by Beckerath bears the traces of a symptomatic belatedness. Entirely conceived in the spirit and the typical symbolic pictorial language of the reform movement of the still young century, whose uncontested pioneer Ferdinand Hodler [FIG. 1] was deemed to be, the immaculate nude bodies it depicts embody the notion of a 'spiritual renewal', according to which the world was to follow the laws of nature and the cosmos, and not those of the market and monetary capital.

In a commentary on his frieze, Beckerath describes his pictorial program based on the eternal wave as a symbolization of a constantly returning occurrence 'in the history of spiritual mankind, which does not culminate in a pyramid towards increasingly higher perfection, but continually proceeds in a horizontal basic direction in wavy lines punctuated by highs and lows. With regard to its subject matter, it thus contradicts the modern evolutionary concept of the world, while formally countering and even



Willy von Beckerath, *Die ewige Welle*, Aula der HFBK Hamburg *Aufgang – Gebunden, Verkündigung und Erleuchtung – Entfaltung*

BY BECKERATH

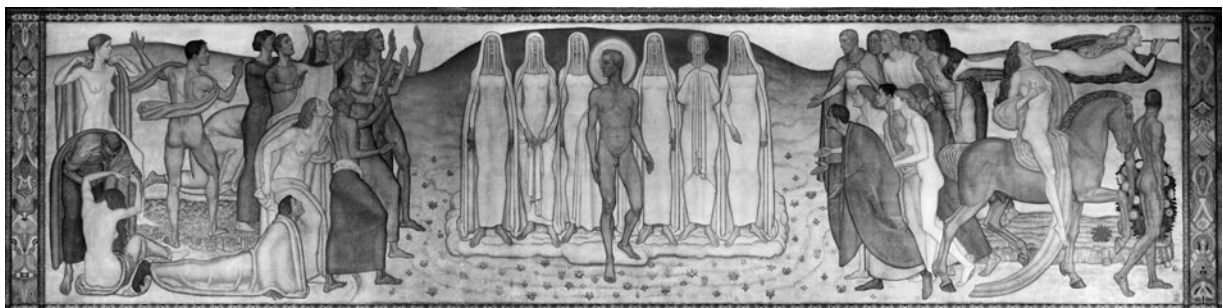
SHAPE IN HAMBURG 100 YEARS AGO

decisively opposing the 'normative' trends'.² Beckerath perceives the individual stages of the visualized movement as 1) *ascension* (the image of dawn), 2) *ligation* (personified in the bound female figure in the triptych's left side wing on the front wall), 3) *annunciation* (the image of the expelled warriors and a group of awakened ones in the front center painting), 4) *epiphany* (the gesture of raised hands in the right front side wing), 5) *unfolding* (symbolizes in the nature image of budding), 6) *fulfillment* (depicted in three parts on the long frieze of the side wall: in the center the figure of the 'lightbringer' in front of personifications of his ideas, flanked by two groups, on the left the 'crescendo' of awakening and on the right a group in motion, which he regarded the culmination of the wave movement), 7) *play* (the iconography of the three graces representing the transformation of spiritual movement into virtuosity), and finally, 8) *decline* (symbolized in two female figures diving into the sea).

Yet when the participants of the ceremonial unveiling in early 1918 had the chance to see the iconographic allegorical program, which depicted the history of mankind in accord with the laws of nature in the image of an eternal

wave, the allegory of nature had lost its innocence in the trenches of war, and thus the notion of a humane natural history had been forcefully disenchanting.

The image cycle has a conflict-ridden history; from the very beginning it encountered resistance and to this day is regarded as 'controversial'; critics and opponents demanded that it should be overpainted; it was repeatedly obscured and covered up, during the Nazi era even for a duration of thirteen years; and in den 1950's the paintings were removed from the walls for a number of years. Its shifting fate is thus not to be viewed without the rejections and dislocations, if not abysses, which gaped between its life reform iconography and the contemporary history of the 20th century. However, since particularly those critics with a traditionalist concept of art felt both aesthetically and morally repelled by Beckerath's frieze after its completion, and the cycle was banned precisely at the time when art was supposed to align itself to the ideal of 'Arian' bodies, the characteristic of belatedness does not apply in aesthetic terms. For instance, it is no longer the nakedness, but rather the idealization of



Die Erfüllung



Fig. 1: Ferdinand Hodler: *Der Tag* (1900), *Die Nacht* (1889)

‘natural’ bodies that arouses offence today. With the belatedness of its symbolic imagery, whose underlying concepts have been brutally superseded by world history, the wall frieze *The Eternal Wave* is entangled in the constellation of a multiple asynchrony and anachronism, which may be read as a lesson in art history: indeed, in exactly the sense of the ‘survival of images’, which lies at the core of Aby Warburg’s studies, the founder of the famous *Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek* (Library of Cultural Science), situated in the Heilwigstrasse in Hamburg. In fact, Warburg’s *Kulturwissenschaft* does not describe the survival (*Nachleben*) of images in terms of a model of progressive chronology, or a succession of styles and epochs, or a pattern of an ‘eternal recurrence of the same’, as postulated by Nietzsche. Doubtlessly, Warburg was interested in the pendular and balancing dynamics oscillating between extreme opposites such as magic and mathematics, ecstasy and tranquility, yet for him these dynamics are part of a history that only reveals itself to us in layers like archeological strata. From these, symbols wandering through space and time in cultural history can be reconstructed, and the return of forgotten

iconographic languages and the unconscious appropriation of ancient expressive gestures through later generations become legible.

Yet with an aesthetic or judgement of taste, or ideology-critical judgment about the fundamental iconographic program the symptoms, which are inscribed in the strata of its survival, become illegible, particularly if such judgments are formulated from the perspective of a retrospective knowledge about the subsequent progression of art history and political history. A surplus in knowledge, which quasi comes naturally to future generations, does not establish a position of judgment, but rather demands closer reading. How easy it is to reject the bearer of light in the center of the longitudinal segment of Beckerath’s frieze, which reveals distinct features of a religious savior figure, since one has the knowledge today of how hideously the yearning for redemption has been deformed by the followers of a murderous autocracy. Yet in taking such a stance, one blanks out that also today the ‘culture and its discontent’ (Freud) that manifests itself in these symbols has by no means been brought to a conclusion. However, at the time when iconographic programs such as



Spiel – Niedergang



Fig. 2: Ludwig von Hofmann: Frühlingssturm (1894/95)

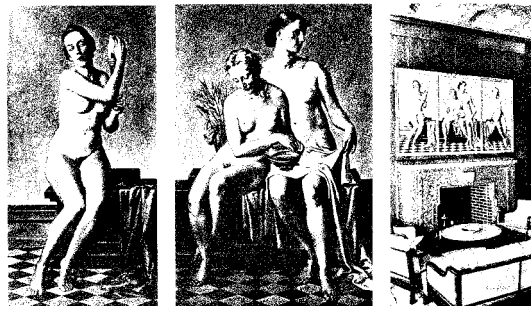


Fig. 3: Adolf Ziegler, *Die vier Elemente. Feuer, Wasser und Erde, Luft* (ca. 1937)



Fig. 4: Max Beckmann, *Die Argonauten* (1949/50),

those of Ferdinand Hodler, Ludwig von Hofmann [FIG. 2], Kolo Moser and Beckerath were conceived, it was still undecided and undecidable in which direction their pictorial vocabulary referring to a form of nature that was liberated from the constraints of civilization would unfold: whether it would proceed to the aseptic normative bodies in the vein of Adolf Ziegler, who succeeded during the Nazi era, or to the expressive paintings of partially distorted and constrained bodies, as rendered by Max Beckmann. [FIG. 3 + 4]

Aby Warburg's speech, held on March 23, 1918, on the occasion of the festive unveiling of Beckerath's murals, seems to be entirely unfettered by such questions and irritations of any kind. In his evaluation there is no indication that Beckerath's idea of a 'history of spiritual humanity' proceeding in waves and returning in cycles crassly runs counter to his own notion of a cultural history, in which through creative practice, be it through the production of tools, clothing, or a symbolic form of activity, a 'thought-space' (*Denkraum*) to nature is brought about.³ Warburg's speech also does not seem to be affected by the fact that the war was in full progress at the time. He only addresses the war shortly in the rhetoric of his closing remarks, namely in expressing gratitude for the fact that it is still possible in the fourth year of the war to attend to cultural matters in Germany. Indeed, we only have the knowledge in retrospect that the war was going to last another seven and a half months, yielding nearly ten million dead and resulting in a disaster for Germany. Yet the

exclusion of the war is particularly remarkable for the reason that Warburg downright obsessively, if not compulsively followed and documented the entire course of the war, doing so in such an *extensive* manner—at the end of the war, his index boxes contained circa 10,000 documents, most of these newspaper clippings⁴—and also in such an *intensive* fashion that he had turned into a kind of living 'seismograph'⁵ in the process. No protective shield was able to bear up against this massive influx of daily recordings, so that the end of the war concurred with Warburg's psychological breakdown. Yet all of this does not seem to have had any bearing on his inauguration speech.

By contrast, the term *arazzo* (Italian for a monumental woven tapestry, engl. arras) in the last part of the speech may be interpreted as a cipher for what this moment, when Beckerath's mural frieze was finally ceremoniously presented to the Hamburg Senate in the name of the donors, primarily meant to Aby Warburg. He pointed out that Beckerath's mural paintings were indeed located on the walls above the wood paneling in the very area, where already in late medieval banqueting halls the arras was situated.⁶ And he adds that one of the smaller murals in which the flower children are emerging from the blossom and forging towards the light ideally represented a 'tapestry as a decorative and meaningful allegory of this school for applied arts, which can and should believe in young people and in the future.' The denotation of Beckerath's mural frieze as an *arazzo*, and the comparison with late medieval tapestries may



Fig. 5: Domenico Ghirlandajo, Grabkapelle der Sassetti in der Santa Trinità, Florenz



Fig. 6: Arazzi mit Holzhackerszenen (15./16 Jh.), Abbildungen zu Aby Warburgs Aufsatz *Arbeitende Bauern auf burgundischen Teppichen* (1907)



Fig. 7: Willy von Beckerath, *Brahms am Flügel* (1896)

be understood first and foremost as a reference to Warburg's understanding of the constellation of patron and artist, and his own role as a cultural politician. In fact, in this situation, Warburg presented himself not chiefly as the deliverer of a celebratory speech, but more so as the initiator of the project, as the driving force of establishing a Beckerath foundation to finance the endeavor, and as an arduous diplomat, who promoted the idea of realizing the monumental mural painting in a public building, particularly in an institution dedicated to educating students in the field of arts and crafts, for which he wished to gain the City Senate's acceptance. In placing Beckerath's mural in the succession of a late medieval arras, at the same time he perceived himself as an heir to those Florentine donors whose self-conception, cultural, and iconographic policies he had intensively studied.

Warburg had extended his research on the survival of forms of expression in Renaissance painting derived from antiquity in the course of his prolonged studies in Florence through investigations of the culture-historical situation and particularly of the role of the Florentine patricians, who, in their capacity as donors of funerary chapels, he considered the most significant commissioners of artists and primary supporters of the arts. In his studies on the Florentine Francesco Sassetti (1901/07), he develops the portrait of a merchant caught in the 'transitional era between the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Age', and interprets Sassetti's extensive testament as an expression of the 'austere willpower of the ancient Roman patriarch'. With regard to

the plans for commissioning Domenico Ghirlandajo to design the family funerary chapel, Santa Trinità [FIG. 5], Warburg particularly emphasizes how seriously Francesco Sassetti, 'the finest representative of the Florentine bourgeois society of the time' asserted his privilege of images.

During the Florentine Cinquecento, this 'privilege of images' denotes a special acquired and heritable privilege in the expressly granting patrician families permission to decorate the choir and altarpiece of a chapel according "to their own discretion", as Warburg has pointed out.⁷ At the same time, Warburg perceived this private privilege exercised in ecclesial public spaces as a special responsibility for finding a pictorial language, in which the conflicting dynamics of the transitional era were given expression and balanced out. In the manner in which Sassetti exercised his 'privilege of images', Warburg sees a reflection of the 'sophisticated Early Renaissance man' endowed with a self-understanding that was aimed at creating an 'ethical equilibrium' and a 'balance full of character'.⁸

Before the backdrop of this portrait of a Florentine merchant, Warburg's culture-political engagement may be interpreted as a transposition of this self-understanding from 16th century Florence to the city of Hamburg in the early 20th century. What in the historical past was considered the patrician's right to supplying a funerary chapel with art can be equated with the right and the responsibility of not leaving iconographic politics in public space to the admin-



Fig. 8: Puvis de Chavannes, *Bois Sacré*, Wandgemälde im Amphitheater der Sorbonne

istrative authorities, but rather placing these in the hands of wealthy and art-historically educated Hamburg citizens. In this respect, Aby Warburg, who himself descended from a long-established Jewish family of bankers, repeatedly championed the incorporation of art in the interiors of public buildings and intervened in the municipal iconographic policy. He did not only perceive himself as a financial supporter, but also assumed the role of *spiritus rector* for the realization of the monumental mural frieze in Schumacher's building. He had succeeded in winning a group of influential and engaged people for the endeavor, among these Senator Johannes August Lattmann, Toni O'Swald, wife of the merchant William Henry O'Swald, acting as second mayor from 1908 to 1910, the entrepreneur and patron Oskar Treplowitz, as well as his brother Max Warburg, the director of the family bank, to whom Aby Warburg had conferred the right of the eldest son to this position in favor of dedicating himself to the study of art and cultural history. In late 1912, he was already able to report that Beckerath's drafts had been accepted; and shortly thereafter his brother confirmed the establishment of a bank account for the project. Since, however, the already assembled sum of 9,700 Marks was not sufficient to realize a monumental frieze with a length of 44 meters and a height of 4 meters, although the artist undertook the endeavor without remuneration, Warburg advocated the establishment of a Beckerath foundation⁹. After this time-consuming commitment and after the long interruption of work on the frieze due to the war, the moment of its completion and the presentation of the



Fig. 9: Hans von Marées, *Die Hesperiden* (1884)

cycle of paintings to the City signified a late, but happy conclusion to this ambitious project, which Warburg had adopted as his own objective.

Yet what connects Beckerath's cycle of paintings with an arras located in a late medieval banquet hall? In a number of contributions on this 'monumental and simultaneously practical wall decoration' produced in the workshops of Burgundian tapestry weavers, Aby Warburg not only made a genre, which had otherwise been dealt with more or less solely as a decorative article of daily use, as a collector's item or as an object of value, a subject of serious art-historical research; in doing so, he simultaneously also analyzed the cultural function of arts-and-crafts objects. In this sense, the cipher of the *arazzo* is also a reference to the program of the reformed school of applied arts, advocating the abolishment of the division between autonomous art and the applied arts.

In his first essay on the topic entitled *Arbeitende Bauern auf burgundischen Teppichen* (Working Peasants on Burgundian Tapestries, 1907), in which three tapestries of the 15th and 16th centuries are discussed, Warburg had described the arras as an 'aristocratic fossil', which, however, had originally been invested with more democratic features; and he identified these features primarily in the tapestry's character as 'mobile vehicle of images' and a reproducible 'circulator of imagery'. Warburg questions the pictorial drama of the life of the working peasants depicted on the tapestries—concretely these are woodcutting scenes [FIG. 6]—with regard to their position 'in the struggle for the

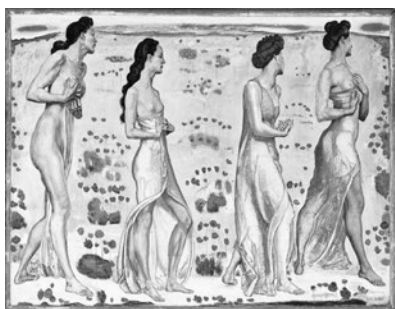


Fig. 10: Ferdinand Hodler, *Die Empfindung* (1901/02)



Fig. 11: Ferdinand Hodler, *Auszug deutscher Studenten in den Freiheitskrieg von 1813* (1908/09)



Fig. 12: Ferdinand Hodler, *Der Ausgewählte* (1893/94)

style rendering active life'¹⁰ in the same way he questioned the paintings of the Renaissance. For him, the expressive gestures in images are significant as varying solutions employed by humans to address and symbolically process their affects. Attending the International Art Historian Conference in 1912 in Rome, Warburg once again encountered Burgundian tapestries from the 15th century in the context of a reception held in Palazzo Doria Pamphili, this time depicting adventures of Alexander the Great. An article that emerged from this entitled *Luftschiff und Tauchboot in der mittelalterlichen Vorstellungswelt* (Airships and Submarines in the Medieval Imagination), which Warburg published in March 1913 in the *Hamburger Fremdenblatt*, discusses the 'traditional right' for these 'practical and at the same time entertaining wall hangings' to recount 'legend and history in its peculiar unclassical style'.¹¹ He promptly sent the article to Beckerath as well. Beckerath expressed his gratitude for Warburg's contribution on the *arazzi*, from which he attempted to construe the latter's conception of great art. The question whether Beckerath—be this humbly or self-critically—viewed this simultaneously as an opinion on his own art, must remain open.

Indeed, the painter definitely had a skeptical and self-critical relationship towards his own art production. In a letter to his friend Gustav Ophüls, written after the completion of the cycle, he expounds that he is aware of his limitations and by no means believes that he has created the work of a genius, yet is convinced that his mural paintings pertain to the future. How significant the symbolically rendered ideas

are for him becomes palpable when he perceives his role merely as that of a prophet, while only a genius could actually complete the work.¹² If this remark is directly related to the iconographic program of the *Eternal Wave* and the appearance of the bearer of light, then this may also be read as a reference to exemplary artists, who at the time were considered geniuses of new painting in accordance with the life reform movement. And Ferdinand Hodler, whose successes in Germany Beckerath closely followed, was particularly suited for this role. Thus Beckerath, who had first aroused attention with paintings of Brahms at the piano [FIG. 7] and in 1906 made a name for himself with his mural *The Elysian Fields* created for the Kunsthalle Bremen, wrote to Warburg in February 1911 that Hodler had received a commission to create a painting in Hanover. (The work in question is the monumental heroic painting *Unanimity*, commissioned for the Town Hall in Hanover, 1911–13). And in a letter written in the second month of the war, he assessed Hodler's paintings as 'integral constituents of German art'.¹³ In his time, the concept of 'German art', which has become sinister to us today, was an aesthetic, not a nationalist notion. The distance of his ideas to the contemporary nationalist understanding of 'German art' becomes clear not least in the fact that Beckerath shortly thereafter stepped forth as a sharp critic and opponent of the *Kampfbund für deutsche Kultur* (Militant League for German Culture).

Let us finally take a quick look at the aesthetic topography of the monumental murals, which Beckerath set foot in with his painting



Fig. 13: Hugo Vogel: *Hamburgs Hafen zur Zeit der Hanse*

cycle. The enormous wall painting carried out by Puvis de Chavanne in the amphitheater in the Sorbonne in Paris [FIG. 8] is doubtlessly a major point of reference. With his monumental rendition *The Sacred Wood* de Chavanne had established the genre of allegorical representation of an idealized spiritual life, which in his case, still in the iconographic tradition of Raphael's *The School of Athens*, depicted personifications of the arts and sciences. In contrast to this, Hans von Marées had developed an aesthetic pictorial language with his triptych *Hesperides* (1884), which became formative for the symbolic murals of the turn of the century, a kind of survival of pagan antiquity in Modernism, in which the nude human body is rendered in the midst of paradisiacal spaces and landscapes, even if the actual topic is often a paradise lost [FIG. 9]. With Ferdinand Hodler, however, a new manner of painting had entered the scene, in the course of which the human body became a pure allegory of cosmic, psychic, or spiritual concepts—such as in *Sentience* (1901–02) [FIG. 10]—this, however, with a tendency to a heroization of the subject matter, as in the large mural *Auszug deutscher Studenten in den Freiheitskrieg von 1813* (1908/09), [FIG. 11], which Hodler painted on behalf of the University of Jena or of a sacralization, as in the painting *The Chosen One* (1893/94) [FIG. 12]. These are the points of orientation, as they back then presented themselves to the artist.

For Warburg the constellation appeared in a different manner. Equally an admirer of Puvis de Chavannes and Hodler, his engagement for the citizen's 'privilege of images' was determined first and foremost by the antipode Hugo Vogler,

who had painted the murals in the ceremonial hall of the Hamburg City Hall [FIG. 13]. In 1910, Warburg had publicly protested against Vogler's cycle that represented five cultural phases in the development of Hamburg, extending from the unpopulated primeval landscape to the contemporary harbor city, in an article whose polemics are resplendent with sarcasm. Thus, he characterizes Vogler's developmental narrative in a 'historical monumental style' as 'a kind of life-sized local history' and as a 'trite attempt at symbolizing the Hanseatic milieu through a juxtaposition of modern fishermen's village realism and medieval costume studies'.¹⁴ His engagement for the wall frieze at the HFBK is thus to be seen as a counter program in iconographic politics to Vogler's images. Warburg hoped that the cycle in the aula of a school for applied arts would motivate the students to engage in a reflection of spiritual subject matter. Even though the notion of the 'spiritual' might have become suspect to us today, we might recall the fact that in 1912, the year, in which the project of the cycle of paintings took shape, Wassily Kandinsky published his treatise *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, which has been acknowledged as *the* programmatic document of modern art.

In the project of the painting cycle *The Eternal Wave*, Warburg's culture-political engagement for the citizens' right to decide on images at public places and Beckerath's reformatory iconographic program, whose ideas go back to the era before the First World War, are conjoined. This program may have been disenchanted by contemporary history, but Warburg's dedication to private art sponsoring and active civic commitment must still be seen today as unfulfilled in a country in which the charity culture runs far behind the financial potential of its citizens.

- 1 Quoted after the diary of Beckerath, Mark A. Russell: *Between Tradition and Modernity. Aby Warburg and the Public Purposes of Art in Hamburg, 1896–1918*, New York, Oxford 2007, p. 189.
- 2 W. v. Beckerath in a letter to Gustav Ophüls on May 7, 1918, in: Willy von Beckerath/ Gustav Ophüls: *Briefwechsel 1896–1926: Zeugnisse einer geistigen Freundschaft*. Erika Ophüls (ed.), Merseburg 1992—Quoted after Michael Diers: Anlässlich der Restaurierung: Willy von Beckeraths Wandzyklus ‚Die ewige Welle‘, in: *newsletter der HfbK*, Nr. 52/Dezember 2008, pp. 6/7.
- 3 In it, “Wiederkehr” takes on a completely different meaning. The French image scholar George Didi-Huberman has discovered in Warburg’s approach a “phantom model of history” that has thrown art history into turmoil and movement. The historicity of images finds “its expression in a compulsive return and a ghostly ‘afterlife’ of forms (...). In other words, in the unconscious, unthought and unconscious of time.” Georges Didi-Huberman: *Das Nachleben der Bilder. Kunstgeschichte und Phantomzeit nach Aby Warburg*. (2002) Frankfurt/M. 2010, p. 30f.
- 4 Cf. Gottfried Korff (ed.): *Kasten 117. Aby Warburg und der Aberglaube im Ersten Weltkrieg*, Tübingen 2007.
- 5 Warburg himself employed the image of the seismograph in describing himself, in: *Reise-Erinnerungen aus dem Gebiet der Pueblos*, in: *Werke in einem Band*, Martin Tremel, Sigrid Weigel, Perdita Ladwig (eds.), Frankfurt/M. 2010, p. 573. Cf. also Didi-Huberman, *Nachleben*, pp. 148f.
- 6 Manuscript of the speech held on March 23, 1918. WIA III. 28.2.5, p. 9.
- 7 Cf. Aby Warburg: Florentinische Wirklichkeit und antikisierender Idealismus, in: *Werke in einem Band*, p. 221 and p. 214.
- 8 Cf. Aby Warburg: Sassetis letztwillige Verfügung, in: *ibid.*, p. 271 and p. 277.
- 9 the details are documented in Aby Warburg’s letters in the archive of the *Warburg Institute London*. Extracts are published in Michale Diers: *Warburg aus Briefen. Kommentare zu den Kopierbüchern der Jahre 1905–1918*. Berlin 1991, S. 91f.
- 10 Aby Warburg: *Arbeitende Bauern auf burgundischen Teppichen*. Cf. on this topic: Michael Diers: *Arbeitende Bauern auf burgundischen Teppichen oder Kunst im Kanzleramt*, in: *Akten*.
- 11 Cf. Aby Warburg: Luftschiff und Tauchboot in der mittelalterlichen Vorstellungswelt, in: *Werke in einem Band*, p. 415.
- 12 Cf. Letter to Gustav Ophüls, May 7, 1918, in: *Briefwechsel*, p. 175.
- 13 Beckerath to Warburg, October 22, 1914.
- 14 Aby Warburg on the murals in the Hamburg Town Hall, in: *GS*, p. 585.

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