CITY, UNIVERSITY OF LONDON, MSC LIBRARY SCIENCE
INM 303 INFORMATION ORGANISATION, DAVID BAWDEN
APRIL 2017

‘anything but indifferent’

THE WARBURG INSTITUTE’S LIBRARY CLASSIFICATION SYSTEM

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This essay is a report on The Warburg Institute's Library classification system. It is divided in three parts: first, in 'Background', I present a bit of the history of the Warburg Institute, with a focus on how it is intrinsically related to the thought and research of its founder Aby Warburg; second, in 'The classification system and the library', I describe further the developments of the Institute, including the adoption of the classification scheme, and provide a description of the classification itself; finally, in 'Considerations', I analyse some of the features of the system, make a few comparisons with both the Library of Congress and Dewey Decimal systems, and leave some open inquiries as opportunity for further research. From a glance, it is evident that I have made many, long citations. I have found great references from both the creators of the classification system, Fritz Saxl and Gertrud Bing, and chose to cite them whenever possible instead of paraphrasing their words, specially Bing's, as I believe the language they used reveals quite a lot about the thought behind the Institute and the classification system itself—and, perhaps, no other classification scheme reflects so much and so well a specific understanding of the world as this one.

Acknowledgements Many thanks to colleague David Baker, once a Graduate Trainee at The Warburg Institute Library, for helping me reach Nessa Malone, who most kindly sent me many useful references for this essay, gave me a tour around the library, and indicated the location of the invaluable ‘NBM 80 shelf’ (where I found most of the materials referenced here)—and showed me how to properly hold an old book. Thank you!

Photo: The Warburg Institute emblem on the cover of a book in its library, Mariana Ou, 2017, CC-0.

1
BACKGROUND
ABY WARBURG'S THOUGHT & THE INSTITUTE

The Warburg Library is an essential component of The Warburg Institute, which is today part of the School of Advanced Studies of the University of London, England. Despite being more than a century old, the essence of the Institute is still very much the same since its origins, in Hamburg: 'It is a laboratory in so far as it devotes itself to a specialised field of research, the interest in and the method of which it seeks to promote; as such its purpose is one of research and education' (Bing, 1933). It originated from the private library of the book collector, art historian Aby Warburg in Germany by the end of the nineteenth century; his a wealthy family that was able to buy him all the books he wanted following a friendly agreement. His library soon became a hub for scholars and researchers, mainly humanists, interested in and fascinated by his collection, which would expand according to Warburg's intellectual endeavours, and was always changing in terms of the order of the books, as Warburg was 'never tired of shifting and reshifting them. Every progress in his system of thought, every new idea about the interrelation of facts made him regroup the corresponding books. The library changed with every change in his research method and with every variation in his interests. Small as the collection was, it was intensely alive, and Warburg never ceased shaping it so that might best express his ideas about the history of man' (Saxl, 1943; In: Gombrich, 1986).

When it comes to Warburg's studies, it began with art history and history of religions, and then turning more specifically to the Renaissance with his dissertation on a couple of Botticelli's paintings. Gertrud Bing, who later in the twentieth century became responsible for the Institute's library and, along with Fritz Saxl, developed the library's classification system according to Warburg's thought, summed up the historian's intellectual motivations and ideas neatly in a 1934 brief article about the library:

> Aby Warburg belonged to a generation for whom **the Renaissance period was of outstanding significance** on account of the apparently sudden brilliant development of a modern, independent outlook on life as opposed to the medieval subjection to church formulas and restrictions. … He did not limit himself to the Renaissance period, but applied the same scrutiny which had yielded these first results also to other ages, asking **what in the various periods, cultural centres and fields of human activity revived or transmitted antiquity signified**, in what form it was received, how transformed or re-interpreted. …
> Another aspect to this question is the anthropological one. Asking himself under what conditions and by what means one civilisation was apt to appear at a later time and under utterly different social and intellectual circumstances, Warburg recognised **symbols to be the vehicle of transmission**. … In the case of European civilisation, Greek art and mythology constituted, as it were, its maximum values of expressive force, and for good or for evil Europe turned to these time and time again. The phenomenon, however, of the original evolution of symbols, and of their transmission and transformation through subsequent strata of civilisation, is not limited to European conditions alone: it may be studied even better in primitive cultures because here the creative process is less encumbered by intellectual accessories. [my emphases]

The way Warburg dealt with these questions corresponded to how he would 'shift and reshift' his books in his library. From his investigations on the 'transmissions of symbols' from Antiquity he formalised the then new field of 'iconology'. According to writer Adam Gopnik:

> Before him, "icon" was largely a religious term, for what Byzantines were always quarrelling about; Warburg, and the practice that he founded, took it over to mean the potent symbolic images of Western art. Warburg, immersed in the Florentine libraries and their documents, began to discover that much of the painting he loved was deeply rooted in more ancient practices, particularly in astrology and other kinds of semi-magical beliefs, and in religious doctrines, some of them very esoteric. A new idea of the Renaissance began to emerge in his mind: not a burst of materialism and humanism against cramped learning but an eruption of certain recurring ancient ideas and images—icons. In 1912, he dubbed this new "science" of art history "iconology" (Gopnik, 2015).

Following Warburg's death in 1929, Fritz Saxl, another art historian who had been for years an essential actor in Warburg's library, became then the new formal director of the Institute and took care that it was successfully transported from Hamburg to London; and in 1933, few days before Goebbels was appointed to cabinet (and book burnings followed), the Warburg Library disembarked in England. Saxl and Bing developed the classification system around that time, when the Institute was being kept in the Thames House in Westminster; after some years there, and another two decades in South Kensington, the Institute and the collection finally met their final, current, purpose-built home in the Woburn Square as it became part of the University of London.

View of The Warburg Institute on a weekday.
It is located by the University of London and the UCL,
and is housed in a purpose-built edifice since 1958.
Photo: Mariana Ou, 2017, CC-0.

By the time the collection arrived in London, it held approximately 70 000 volumes; today, The Warburg Institute has 360 000, making it 'the largest collection in the world focused on Renaissance studies and the history of the classical tradition. It includes a large number of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century continental books and periodicals (especially German and Italian) unavailable elsewhere in the UK, as well as several thousand pre-1800 items' (The Warburg Institute, 2016). From the Institute's website information, it is clear how the scope of the library hasn't really changed much, and was able to maintain Warburg's thought alive:

> The Warburg Institute is the premier institute in the world for the study of cultural history and the role of images in culture. It is cross-disciplinary and global. It is concerned with the histories of art and science, and their relationship with superstition, magic, and popular beliefs. Its researches are historical, philological and anthropological. It is dedicated to the study of the survival and transmission of cultural forms – whether in literature, art, music or science – across borders and from the earliest times to the present.

2
THE CLASSIFICATION SYSTEM & THE LIBRARY
COMBINING SERENDIPITY AND RETRIEVABILITY

For this report, I was not able to trace precisely when the Warburg Library classification system was developed, only that it was a work by both Saxl and Bing, and that by 1934, when the collection was first established in London, it was in use (or had just been established). Bing published an article that year highlighting the nature of the scheme, as well as the general and sub-class subjects. The most fundamental, though, was that the classification was meant to follow the 'workshop' essence of the Institute, which 'determined not only the outlines of its collections but also their arrangement, their classification, housing, and working organisation'. The classification of the collection was meant to reflect Warburg's ideas about the interconnection of the various historical disciplines and facts, in a way that 'the history of art may not be studied independently but rather in its interaction with other branches of learning which in their turn only receive their proper significance if taken as a whole':

> **With regard to the classification of the library, the main consideration was that it should exemplify the ideas on which research was to be carried on.** By means of an author-catalogue, a subject index, place indicators, and press-marks, the reader may easily find any special book he wants to consult, and if not interested, need not bother about the classification at all. **But the classification is anything but indifferent. The manner of shelving the books is meant to impact certain suggestions to the reader** who, looking on the shelves for one book, is attracted by the kindred ones next to it, glances at the sections above and below, and finds himself involved in a new trend of thought which may lend additional interest to the one he was pursuing.
>
> These ideas proved to be so fertile that Warburg's library, originally collected merely for his own studies, grew to be a centre for scholars of various descriptions; anthropologists, theologians and historians of religion, medievalists, psychologists, folklorists, philologists and antiquaries not only found the books they needed for their special researches **but found them arranged in such a manner as to suggest certain interactions** with and relations to other subjects. They found, moreover, **displayed in the books a conception of history as a unit, which induced them to break down the barriers between the different fields of research**, to overcome the restrictions to specialised subjects which the ever increasing volume of learning had inevitably brought with it.' [my emphases] (Bing, 1934).

The classification system developed for the Warburg library, then, is a very explicit attempt to represent one man's intellectual perspective of the world, as reflected once on his once private library and in the way he was connected with it and organised the books on the shelves. It is a classification system built from both a very specific thought and a very specific collection of volumes; in that sense, it never aimed to be an general solution for organising documents in any library, even though it has always held an universal variety of subjects in its collection. In fact, Warburg's private library displayed a great unity also because the man was often unconcerned with bibliographical matters; as Saxl phrased it in his later story of the library:

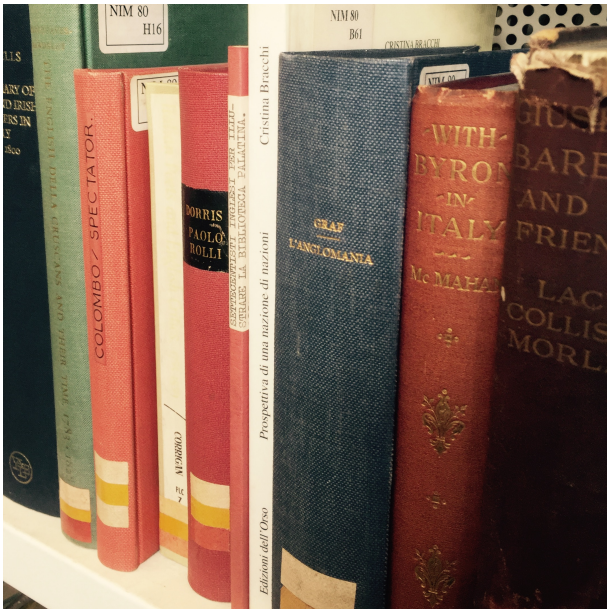
> When I first saw the Library in 1911, it was obvious that Warburg had lived for a number of years in Italy. In spite of its comprehensive framework it was essentially German and Italian. It had at that time around 15000 volumes, …a man whose purchases were so much dedicated by his momentary interests eventually collected a library which possessed the standard books on a given subject plus a quite exceptional number of other and often rare and highly interesting publications. Often one saw Warburg standing tired and distressed bent over his boxes with a packet of index cards, trying to find for each one the best place within the system. … It took some time to realise that **his aim was not bibliographical.** …
>
> One thing that made life especially burdensome to Warburg: his supreme lack of interest in library technicalities. … cataloguing was not done to fixed rules, …
>
> **What the library was, it had become through Warburg's genius, every book had been selected by him, the systematic arrangement was his, his the contacts with a wide circle of scholars.** (Saxl, 1943)

Both Bing and Saxl's accounts touch on a characteristic of the Warburg library which is still distinctive today: all the volumes are on shelves which are open and accessible for every user. That is how it has always been, as Warburg believed in power of browsing the shelves in search of a book, and stumbling upon other books which initially might not have been of your interest. The open shelves were not the norm in the beginning of the twentieth century, though; the trend was to keep the reference books in unaccessible storage, only retrievable upon request, as browsing was being considered a 'threat' to the integrity of the materials. Keeping the Warburg collection always open, then, was a bit of an act of resistance—and again, one that matched what Warburg himself believed:

> Those were the decades when in many libraries, big and small, the old systematic arrangements were thrown overboard since the old categories no longer corresponded to the requirements of the new age. The tendency was to arrange the books in a more 'practical' way; standardisation, alphabetical and arithmetical arrangements were favoured. The file cabinets of the systematic catalogue became the main guide to the student; access to the shelves and to the books themselves became very rare.
>
> Warburg recognised this danger. **He spoke of the 'law of the good neighbour'.** The book for which one knew was in most cases not the book which one needed. The unknown neighbour on the shelf contained the vital information, although from its title one might not have guesses this. The overriding idea was that the books together—each containing its larger or smaller bit of information and being supplemented by its neighbours—should by their titles guide the student to perceive the essential forces of the human mind and its history. Books were for Warburg more than instruments of research. **Assembled and grouped, they expressed the thought of mankind in its constant and in its changing aspects.** (Saxl, 1943)

This idea had consequences to the classification system; how to classify and position the books on shelves in a way that, despite systematisation, would still allow serendipity and flow, and at the same time indexation and retrievability? By the 1930s, with Warburg's death, the relocation of the library from Hamburg to London, and the formal establishment of the Institute, there should be *some way* one organising the books in a friendly way with regards to the new visitor, but without missing the whole point of the library—and of Warburg's beliefs.

Saxl and Bing came up with a solution that involved three random (not alphabetical) capital letters representing three levels of classification, from general to specific; nothing very new here. However, each letter was represented by coloured slips of paper on the back of each book, giving a visual perception of a 'group of books' on the shelf and reinforcing the notion of the whole, not the individual book—each book did have a following sequence of numbers to specify it even more, but that mattered only in the backstage; on the shelves, the three-letters system along with the slips-of paper system was what the user would have contact with, and what would decide the placement on the shelves. Bing described the system in her 1934's explanatory article:



A book on, let us say, the life of Botticelli would have at about one and a half inches from the lower edge three paper slips, one wine red, the second pink, the third dark green; the press-mark would accordingly consist of three letters: C (always standing for wine red), N (for pink), A (for dark green), and a number denoting the books treating of Botticelli's life only. This comparatively simple press-mark is representative of the entire scheme of arrangement: Colours and letters in their relative and, of course, varying sequence denote a system of classification, the top colour and first letter signifying the department of study (C = Art History), the second the country (N = Italy), and the last one the respective subdivision (e.g. A = painting). Thus the second colour would reappear in the section on Italian literature, only then headed by a different top colour (e.g. light blue = E = literature) (Bing, 1934)

This photo (above, CC-0) taken by me at the Warburg Library today shows a randomly chosen section of bookshelf; as we can see, some books still have the coloured slips of paper on their spines, but not all of them, as this system is no longer applied. Today, the books are referred by the stickers on their cover, displaying their classmark (from the photo, we can see this is the NIM 80 classmark section). The three-letters classification system remains, but not the related 'slips-of-coloured-paper' system—even though lots of books, if not the majority of them in some sections, still have the paper slips attached to them. Bing explained that the visual appeal of this system made sense in terms of the 'open shelves' choice of the library and praised the possibility of browsing:

> If the reader is to be drawn into this way of looking at things by the arrangements of the books, it naturally follows that he must have access to the shelves. … the pleasure and charm of handling the books, opening them and 'browsing' as you pass along the aisles, can never be replaced by a card index. The educational influence of a library which invites a student to adopt a special subject and method of research can only be effective if he is allowed to be guided by the books themselves. (Bing, 1934)

When it comes to the classification itself and its workings, initially, fours main subjects, corresponding to the first of the three letters in the notation (and top coloured-slip-of-paper), were subdivided in sub-subjects, in their turn corresponding to the second letter (and middle coloured-slip-of-paper). The main and sub-subjects were reported by Bing as it follows; this is possibly the first formal organisation of the Warburg collection:

> The Warburg Library classification general subjects and sub-classes,
> as described by Gertrud Bing in 1934:
>
> First section: **Religion, Natural Science, and Philosophy**
>
> 1. Anthropology and Comparative Religion
> 2. The Great Historical Religions
> 3. History of Magic and Cosmology
> 4. History of Philosophical Ideas
>
> Second Section: **Language and Literature**
>
> 1. History of Greek and Roman Literature
> 2. Survival of Classical Poets
> 3. Survival of Classical Subjects
> 4. History of Classical Scholarship
> 5. History of Modern National Literatures
>
> Third section: **Fine Arts**
>
> 1. Literary Sources
> 2. Iconography
> 3. Primitive and Oriental Arts, Pre-Hellenic Period
> 4. Classical Archaeology
> 5. Early Christian and Medieval Art
> 6. Renaissance Art in Europe
> 7. History of Art Collections
>
> Fourth Section: **Social and Political Life**
>
> 1. Methods of History and Sociology
> 2. History of Social and Political Institutions in Southern and Northern Europe
> 3. Folklore, History of Festivals, Theatre, and Music
> 4. Forms of Social Administration, Legal and Political Theory

Edgar Wind, art historian and researcher associated to the Warburg Institute at that time (and who later became the first art history Professor of the University of Oxford), wrote a brief article following Bing's in 1935 to stress some of the Warburg library classification scheme specificities:

> Two traits, in particular, of the Warburg library will have to be remembered:
>
> **1.** Within that specialised field of cultural history and psychology which is circumscribed by the "Survival of the Classics", the Library endeavours to be encyclopaedic; i.e. it interconnects such

seemingly independent subjects as the history of art, of science, of superstition, of literature, of religion, etc;

2. It is meant to be used like a reference library, the readers having open access to the shelves.

Accordingly, the system which follows is calculated to satisfy two needs in addition to those of unambiguous identification [the coloured slips of paper]:

1. To make interconnections easily visible;

2. To supply an efficient system of control by which misplaced books can be easily detected. (Wind, 1935)

Even though the library does not apply the slips of paper identification system, today the books are still organised under very much the same four general categories described by Bing. However, the most distinguishable feature of the classification, that is, the naming of the four categories as **'Image'**, **'Word'**, **'Orientation'**, and **'Action'**, and their arrangement in separate spaces (in the present building, in different floors), is *not* described in Bing's article. In the temporary place of the Thames House, the bookshelves and the four categories were arranged all in the same room—lack of other option, or on purpose? We do know that the collection was arranged in different rooms according to the categories by the end of the 1920s, right before its transport to London; it is not clear, though, if the four sections were named the way they are today (in the present Warburg Institute website's segments about its history, this information is not clear either; further search for evidence on this matter is needed, as I judged that, for now, it goes beyond the scope of this report). In anyway, by 1960, when the Institute had just been relocated to its permanent home in Woburn Square, the relation between the four categories were very clearly determined, as well as their 'names', and their separation in four different floors of the edifice; an informative brochure authored by the Institute in 1960, probably as an 'advertisement' of the recently installed organisation as part of the University of London, provides a nice summary:

> The classical tradition is a theme that cuts across the conventional borders of subject and period and its study should thus help to **counteract the fragmentation of knowledge**. The bias is not towards 'classical' values in art and literature: students will find represented all strands of the tradition that link Western civilisation with its origins in the ancient world. **It is this element of continuity that is stressed in the arrangement of the library: the tenacity of symbols and images in European art and architecture, the persistence of motifs and forms in Western languages and literature, the gradual transition, in Western thought, from magical beliefs to religion, science and philosophy, and the survival and transformation of ancient patterns in social customs and political institutions.**
>
> **The library was to lead from the visual image (Bild), as the first stage in a man's awareness, to language (Wort) and thence to religion, science and philosophy, all of them products of man's search for orientation (Orientierung) which influence his patters of behaviour and his actions, the subject matter of history. Action, the performance of rites (dromena), in its turn is superseded by reflection which leads back to linguistic formulations and the crystallisation of image symbols that complete the cycle.** [my emphases] (Warburg Institute, 1960).

The fundamental structure of the current classification system of main and sub categories of the Warburg Institute is shown in the following page; its nature can still be accurately described by this account of the 1960's above.

4th floor: ACTION

D - Society and Culture

- DA - Psychology
- DL - Anthropology
- DD - Folklore
- DN - Position of Women
- DB - History of Women
- DE - Theatre
- DC - Festivals
- DF - Technology
- DG - Transport
- DM - Trade
- DI - Public Opinion
- DK - Law
- DH - Sociology
- DP - Political Theory

H - History

- HA - Historiography
- HR - Greek History
- HP - Roman History
- HG - Byzantine History
- HN - Italian History
- HB - French History
- HD - Belgian History
- HF - Dutch History
- HM - British History
- HC - American History
- HI - Scandinavian History
- HO - Swiss History
- HE - German History

2nd floor: WORD

E - Language and Literature

- EAF-EAB - Theory of language and literature
- EK, EG, EP - Greek, Hellenistic, Roman Literature
- EN - Italian Literature
- EL - Spanish and Portuguese Literature
- EB - French Literature
- ED - Scandinavian Literature
- EF - Dutch Literature
- EM - English Literature
- EE - German Literature
- EC - Slavonic and Eastern European Literature

N - Transmission of Classical Texts

- NA - Medieval and humanistic literature
- NK - Survival of Classical Literature
- NE - Classical and Medieval Themes in Literature
- NO - Pictorial Symbols
- NF - Encyclopaedias
- NP, NM - History of the Book, History of Libraries
- NH - Manuscripts
- NC - Bookbinding and Illustrations
- NL - Pedagogics
- NB - Universities
- NI - Cultural Exchanges
- ND - Travel

3rd floor: ORIENTATION

B - Western Religions

- BF, BE, BK - Comparative Religion, Greco-Roman, Teutonic and Slavonic
- BC - Christianity, Texts
- BC - Christianity, Studies
- BM - Christianity since Reformation, Sources

G - Eastern Religions

- GP - Turkey
- GM - Judaism
- GA - Islam
- GD - India
- GC - China and Japan

A - Philosophy

- AK - Greek and Roman Philosophy
- AG, AB - Jewish and Arabic Philosophy, Medieval Philosophy
- AC - Renaissance Philosophy
- AD, AA, AM - Modern Philosophy

F - Magic and Science

- FF - Natural Science
- FB - Magic
- FC - Magical Objects
- FD - Sorcery and secret societies
- FO - Zoology, Botany, Mineralogy, Pharmacy
- FG - Alchemy and Chemistry
- FE - History of Medicine
- FN - Mathematics
- FM - Divination
- FG - Prophecy
- FA - Astrology and Astronomy
- FI - Cosmology
- FP - Geography, Exploration Cartography

1st floor: IMAGE

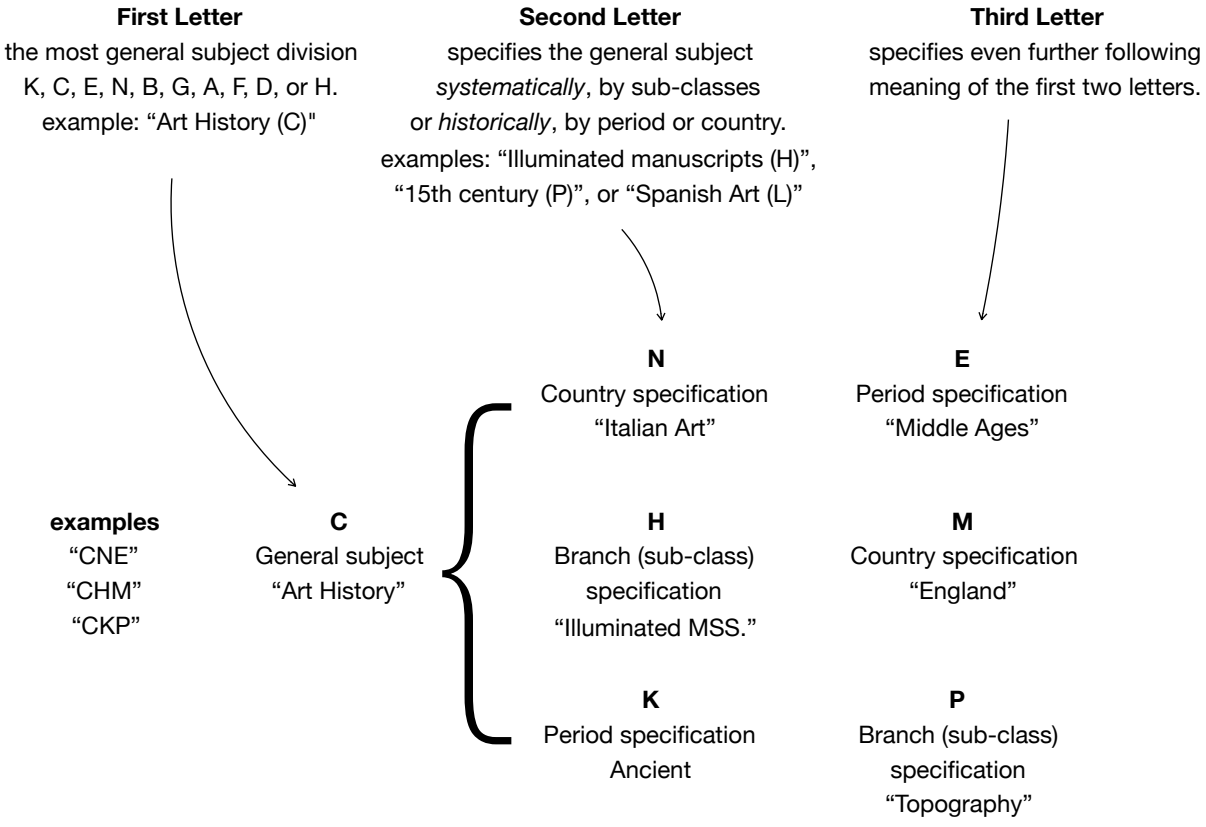
K - Ancient Art and Archaeology

- KD - Primitive and Prehistoric Art
- KG - Oriental Art
- KF, KP - Classical Archaeology, Topography
- KO - Classical Iconography
- KFF - Numismatics
- KK - Greek Art
- KN, KEF - Roman Art, Migration period

C - Art History

- CF - General Art History
- C-H - Literary Resources
- CI, CA - Art Interpretation and aesthetics
- CP - Topography
- CO - Iconography
- CK- Survival of Ancient Art
- CC - Early Christian and Byzantine Art
- CH - Illuminated Manuscripts
- CN - Italian Art
- CL - Spanish Art
- CB - French Art
- CD, CFM - Flemish and Dutch Art
- CM - British Art
- CE - German Art
- CEK - Scandinavian Art
- CG, CGI - Applied Arts, Art Collecting
- CR - Modern Art

The following diagram was designed from Wind's description of the three-letters system, as it is still used today:



These photos (above, right; Mariana Ou, CC-0) taken in the current Institute show the view of the visitor who approaches the 2nd floor, the 'Word' floor: a large sign displays what that floor holds using the terms of the classification scheme and the notations. We can see from the photo on the right that, for example, 'Dutch Literature' corresponds to the letter 'EF', followed by a third, specifying letter.

Each of the four floors, corresponding to the four categories, has a sign like that by the entrance, presenting proudly in a very open, comprehensive way the classification scheme and its notation, as well as the sequence of the sections, which is important to be shown as the notation is *not* alphabetical. All the signs also display a friendly remainder of how the whole library is organised:

> The four categories of Image, Word, Orientation and Action constitute the main divisions of the Warburg Institute Library and encapsulate its aim to study:
>
> The tenacity of symbols and images in European art and architecture:
> **IMAGE**, 1st floor
>
> The persistence of motifs and forms in Western languages and literatures:
> **WORD**, 2nd floor
>
> The gradual transition, in Western thought, from magical beliefs to religion, philosophy and science:
> **ORIENTATION**, 3rd & 4th floor
>
> The survival and transformation of ancient patterns in social customs and political institutions:
> **ACTION**, 4th floor

This diagram (left) is a version of the emblem used by the Warburg Institute, which in turn is taken from a woodcut of the 15th century, depicting the four elements earth, water, air and fire, as it featured in an edition of *De natura rerum* of Isidore of Seville (560-636). In this version, the four elements were substituted by the four categories of the sections of the library; it appears in the Institute's website without specific attribution.

Finally, Wind has described some special situations that required specific solutions in the three-letters system: 1. the letter 'F' meaning 'General' features as the third letter in all departments in the case that the first two letters already cover the subject of the book, e.g. a book on 'Italian Art' irrespective of specific period; 2. some departments like Psychology are not sensibly arranged by period or country, so the letters will not correspond to a combination of meanings, but rather will express hierarchy of specificity of the field only; 3. 'Source books', or primary sources, are to be arranged separately from the books which treat of the subject historically; these works come as a group before the other books of the section, and their third letter in the notation is the same in all departments, 'H'.

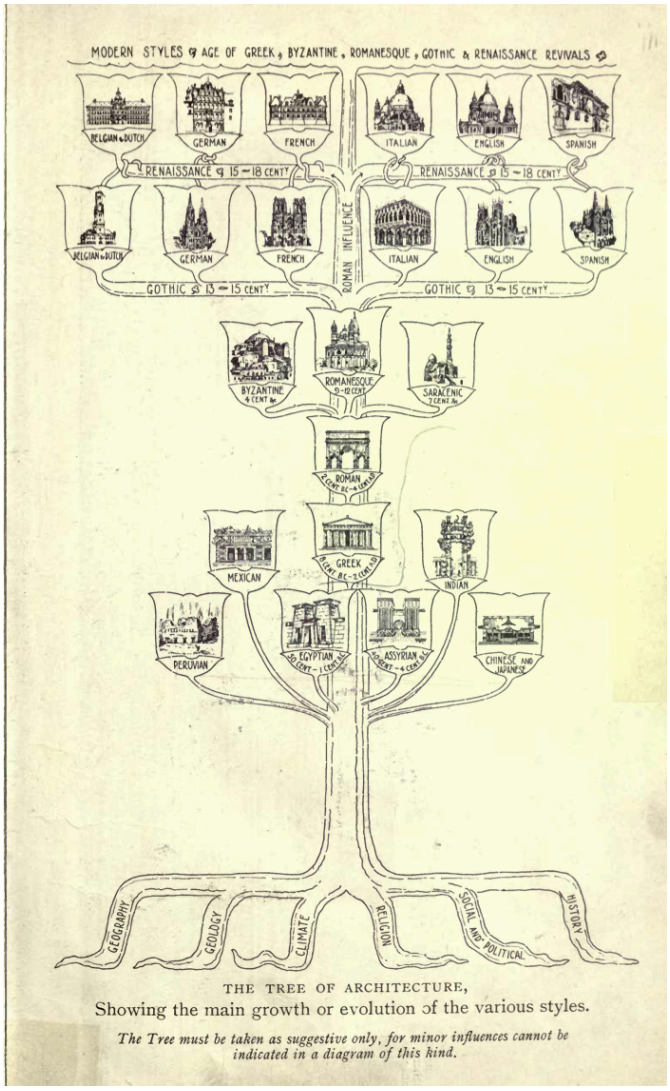
3
CONSIDERATIONS
STRENGHTS, WEAKNESSES, COMPARISONS

On the classification system in general: The Warburg Institute's library classification system is, obviously, a very specific one; it was made with the particular aim of organising the Warburg's collection, and necessarily using Warburg's ideas as guideline. Both the collection of materials and a special way of thinking about its internal cohesion were a given; in that sense, it is very different from classification systems that departed from the problem of how to organise every book published, which aimed at being more universal tools. The Warburg library classification scheme, on the other hand, originated from a question that could have been something as: how do we turn a private library where books are arranged according to one man's line of thought into a proper, manageable Institute's reference library, where visitors will be able to browse and retrieve materials appropriately—but still keeping the founder's thoughts alive? I believe Saxl and Bing's classification system was successful in addressing this problem, which is no easier to solve than developing an universal classification scheme (less laborious, perhaps).

The combination of the three-letters system with the coloured-slips-of-paper system was an ingenious one, but the latter did not stand the test of time and was, for some reason, abandoned—it would be interesting to look further into the context in which the choice for not using it any longer was made, and why. One technical problem is that the colour of the paper fades with time, and unevenly between different colours; what was one red and dark pink may now both look like light pink, which in turn might have kept looking light pink... But the idea of corresponding alpha-numerical notations to some kind of visual system is one that could be revived, as some books under some systems may present very long classmarks, which are definitely very hard both to fit on the spine of the book and to read when looking for it on a bookshelf.

On the guiding principle of the system: No classification system can be perfect, and it will always reflect a certain worldview; in this case, it is one man's worldview, but a man whose ideas were in tune with the zeitgeist of the intellectual scene of end-of-nineteenth-century Europe. We can find in Warburg's conception of the civilisations of the world some notions that are very contested today, like 'evolution' of phenomena and practices, 'primitive cultures', and the Renaissance, or the resulting Western modern 'civilisation', as the pinnacles of 'man's' history as heritage of the Classical period.

In such a perspective, the 'Orient' and other 'primitive civilisations' have place as long as they fit in the narrative of the Western thought development; their own specificities which are not clearly related to this narrative are simply ignored. Aby Warburg was born in the same year as Sir Banister Fletcher, the prominent English architect author of the diagram *The Three of Architecture* (below), a very compelling work to be compared with Warburg's. In Fletcher's diagram, architectural styles 'evolve' upwards and grow with the Tree; some styles are an unconflicted succession of others. Evidently, the main branch of the three features the Western 'Greek', 'Roman', and 'Romanesque' styles; more 'exotic' styles, like the 'Mexican' or 'Indian', grow from branches before the emergence of the Greek style and simply



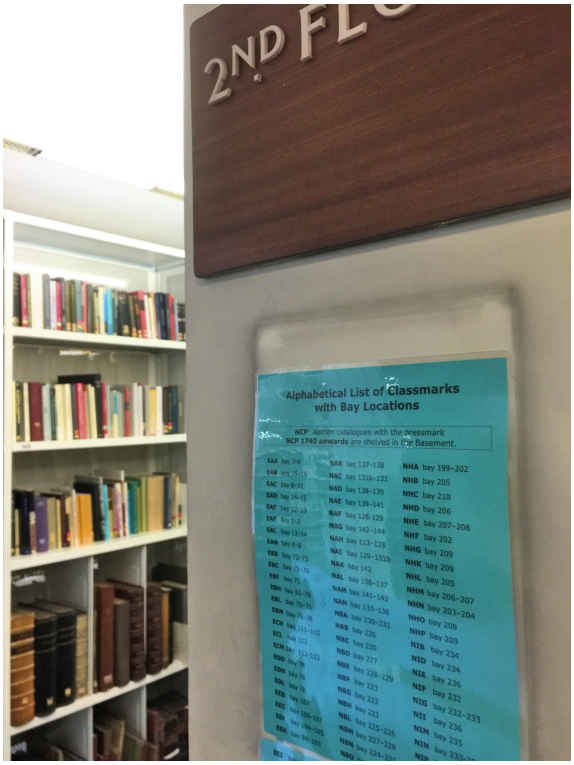
This image is Public Domain and was retrieved from Wikimedia Commons website.

end, without further 'evolutions'—they are the 'primitive' styles. The European Renaissance styles are at the top of the tree, the gran finale of millennia of development of Western thought and aesthetics.

I have stressed some of the aspects of Fletcher's *Tree* which I think Warburg wouldn't object. These are conceptions that belong to a specific generation of European intellectuals, and that do not find many adherents today anymore by claims of simplistic eurocentrism—but have left their mark in library classification systems, as many of the ones which are in use today were developed around that same time. What I think would be relevant to ask about the Warburg library is: if it is so loyally based in Warburg's ideas, isn't it reinforcing this dated perception of world history, even more if it is also a research centre, or has research embraced the critique of this perception and has been able to expand the book collection in new ways, freely from constrains that the original idea of the library materials may have imposed?

On retrievability Compared to other classifications systems, retrievability is definitely not a strength of the Warburg's library organisation scheme—but that is more or less the point of this library anyway: if you come looking for one specific book, it intends to motivate you to look at other books, as their main classmark, made of three letters, refers to a group of books and not one in specific; in that way, you are forced to look at many different items to be able to find that specific one you wanted in the first place.

That is all fine and appealing, but today it requires a lot of signalling and a complex work of numbering shelves and bays which in a certain way compensate the simplicity of the classification system itself: the less specific the classification system, the more complex the ways of trying to determine the process of reaching a specific item. Apart from that, a complicating factor is that the three-letters system is not alphabetical and actually quite random; very different from the Dewey Decimal classification, for example: libraries that adopt the DDC tend to arrange the bays in numerical order, so you know a book with classmark starting with a 2 will be somewhere far, and before, a book with a classmark 7 or 9.



Apart from the large sign by the entrance of each floor, as shown in the previous section of this report, each floor in the Warburg library also has an 'Alphabetical List of Classmarks with Bay Locations' listing (left photo, blue poster) right by the entrance door, below a sign indicating the floor. The user should find out from the large sign (or from the library catalogue) the three-letter classmark corresponding to his field of interest, then consult the listing corresponding classmarks to bay numbers, *then* find the bay by referring to green signs on the side of each shelf (the shelves and bays are in numerical order)—see photo on the right. Quite a complex process, if you want to find an specific work. Also, it undermines one of the main advantages of the classification system highlighted by Bing: 'it is absolutely independent of the collocation of the books on the shelves; sections may be removed, and new combinations made without fear of the press-marks no longer falling in with each other' (Bing, 1934). Perhaps because of the greater size of the current collection, this 'group of books' approach, independent of the shelves they are on, was left aside, in favour of a more well-determined, retrievable way of arranging the books.

A quick comparison On the following three pages three schemes are presented; they correspond to the location of a same book (*Venice transfigured: the myth of Venice in British culture, 1660-1797*) in: first, the Warburg library classification; second, the Library of Congress classification; and third, the Dewey Decimal classification. Some aspects become clear. Warburg library classification classmarks tend to be shorter, but this advantage, as seen above, means more work to retrieve the item. Different from LCC, the Warburg three-letter system does not follow alphabetical order, but the further specifying numerals are ordered numerically: 'NIM 5' comes before 'NIM 80', that comes before 'NIM 1650' etc. Only from the information on the LCC and the DDC's classmark of the book, you can have an idea of where its location will be in the library, as they follow alphanumerical order. Something interesting: I could not find the LCC's classmark for this specific book in the latest version of the classification system outline;

most likely, it is in a section of the classification that is under revision at the moment. This is a strength of the Warburg system: even though it was originated from a peculiar thought for a unique library, it has been able to accommodate the new acquisitions without much need of revision; only one or two three-letters sequences were added to the classification since its conception. On the other hand, larger classifications with great level of specificity in their notations, like the LCC and the DDC, require frequent maintenance and reviewing—the DDC, for example, is in its 22nd version. Both the LCC and the DDC locate this randomly chosen book within 'History of Europe', with the LCC considering it under 'History of England' and the DDC in 'History of Italian peninsula & adjacent isles'. Contrastingly, in the Warburg classification, the book is inside the 'Word' category, in 'Cultural Exchanges' within 'Transmission of Classical Texts'. From the three, the Warburg classification sounds like the one which was able to match more accurately with the actual subject of the book. If we compare many other books, will this ability be consistent? And does it happen because the Warburg classification is smaller, unique-collection focused, or perhaps it has actually found a better way of classifying subjects?

The Warburg Library Classification for:

Eglin, J. 2001. *Venice transfigured : the myth of Venice in British culture, 1660-1797*. New York, Palgrave.

• Classmark: **NIM 80.E34**

4 - ACTION
3 - ORIENTATION
2 - WORD
- E - Language and Literature
- **N - Transmission of Classical Texts**
  - NA - Medieval and humanistic literature
  - NK - Survival of Classical Literature
  - NE - Classical and Medieval Themes in Literature
  - NO - Pictorial Symbols
  - NF - Encyclopaedias
  - NP, NM - History of the Book, History of Libraries
  - NH - Manuscripts
  - NC - Bookbinding and Illustrations
  - NL - Pedagogics
  - NB - Universities
  - **NI - Cultural Exchanges**
    - NIF - General
    - NIG - East-West
    - NIN - Mediterranean Countries
    - NIB - France
    - NID - Low Countries
    - **NIM - England**
      - **NIM 5-1650,** further specified by country with numbers
    - NIE - Germany
    - NIP - Eastern Europe
    - NII - America
  - ND - Travel

1 - IMAGE

Library of Congress Classification for:

Eglin, J. 2001. *Venice transfigured : the myth of Venice in British culture, 1660-1797*. New York, Palgrave.

• Classmark from Cornell University Library catalogue, USA: **DA485 E35 2001**

A - General Works
B - Philosophy, Psychology, Religion
C - Auxiliary Sciences of History
D - World History and History of Europe, Asia, Africa, Australia, New Zealand etc.
Subclass DA - Great Britain
History of Great Britain - DA1-995
British Empire. Commonwealth of Nations. The Commonwealth
England - DA20-690
General
History - DA28-592
General
Political, military, naval, and Air Force history.
Antiquities. Social life and customs. Ethnography
By period - DA129-592
Early and medieval to 1485
Modern, 1485- - DA300-592
T tudors, 1485-1603
Civil War and Commonwealth, 1642-1660
Later Stuarts - DA430-463
1714-1760 - DA498-503
George III, 1760-1820
Victorian era, 1837-1901
20th century
Description and travel. Guidebooks
Local history and description
Wales
Scotland
Ireland
E - History of the Americas
F - Geography, Anthropology, Recreation
H - Social Sciences
J - Political Science
K - Law
L - Education
M - Music and Books on Music
N - Fine Arts
P - Language and Literature
Q - Science
R - Medicine
S - Agriculture
T - Technology
U - Military Science
V - Naval Science
Z - Bibliography, Library Science, Information Resources

Dewey Decimal Classification for:

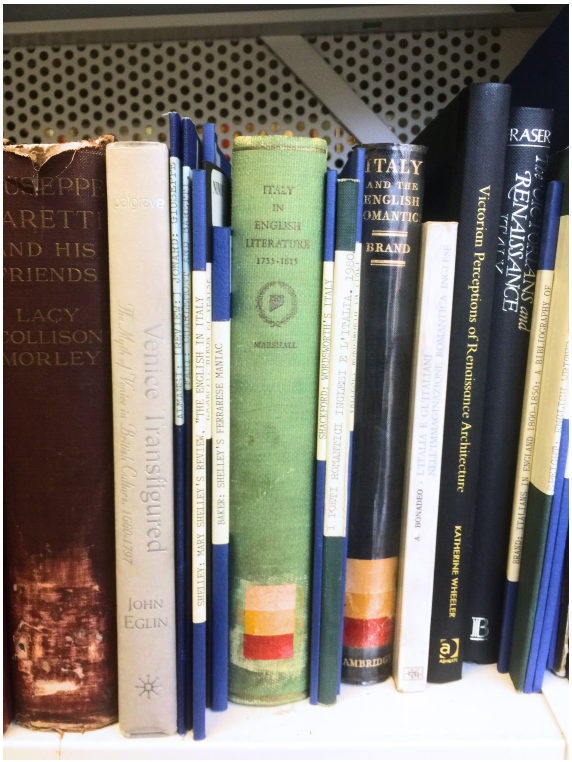
Eglin, J. 2001. *Venice transfigured : the myth of Venice in British culture, 1660-1797.* New York, Palgrave.

• Classmark from Rhodes University Library catalogue, South Africa: **945.31 EGL**

000 - General works, Computer science and Information
100 - Philosophy and psychology
200 - Religion
300 - Social sciences
400 - Language
500 - Pure Science
600 - Technology
700 - Arts & recreation
800 - Literature
900 - History
910 - Geography and travel
920 - Biography and genealogy
930 - History of ancient world (to ca. 499)
940 - History of Europe
940 - History of Europe
941 - British Isles
942 - England and Wales
943 - Germany and neighbouring central European countries
944 - France and Monaco
945 - Italian Peninsula & adjacent islands
946 - Spain, Andorra, Gibraltar, Portugal
947 - Russia and neighbouring east European countries
948 - Scandinavia
949 - Other parts of Europe
950 - History of Asia
960 - History of Africa
970 - History of North America
980 - History of South America
990 - History of other areas

On development and growth The classification system has proved efficient in accommodating new materials, and has been able to survive without the need for frequent revision; the only problem is that unlimited growth of the collection is in contradiction with the nature of the Warburg library. As Bing observed, if constant alterations to the classification system is successfully avoided in the library, 'it is due to the intrinsic unity of the collection; it may be refined and improved, but not disproportionately enlarged. All its sections retain their comparative place and value by virtue of their being referred to one another and each related to the main thought, that of the survival of antiquity'. Even though the collection can be enlarged as the classification permits so, it does not mean that it is desirable to, or that it would make sense to. Also, no section of the Warburg classification grew disproportionally in size, as it happens in libraries that adhere to the DDC, for example; however, this is mostly due to the fact that new acquisitions to the Warburg collection are very themed focused; it wouldn't bother holding books on Python programming—or any kind of computer programming, really. The LCC and the DDC are much more subject to the fashions and new ideas of the times than the Warburg library is.

On serendipity Perhaps the most famous characteristic of the Warburg library, greatly due to its classification system, is that it allows—and actively incites—serendipity. The system provides quite unusual relationships between items that are often disconnected in other libraries. I have randomly chosen a book from the Warburg collection to make a simple comparison of different classification schemes. That previously discussed book, *Venice Transfigured*, is the light grey one by the left in the photo below. A few books to the right, we can find a book of black spine, golden lettering called *Victorian perceptions of Renaissance Architecture*. This is the section 'NI - Cultural Exchanges' under 'N - Transmission of Classical Texts', around 'NIM 80' which corresponds to 'M - England' and '80 - Italy'. We have already seen that, under LCC and DDC, Venice Transfigured is classified somewhere within 'History of Europe'. When it comes to *Victorian perceptions*, though, the Cornell University Library catalogue, which uses the LCC, classify it with the classmark NA1115.W49 2014, corresponding to 'Architecture historiography'; similarly, in the Bibliotheque nationale de France, using the DDC, marks it as 724.12, also under 'Architecture historiography'—which is located very distant from 'History of Europe', but in the Warburg classification, these works are very close to each other.



Even though this 'serendipity effect' is diminished by the enlargement of both the collection and the library building itself, it seems to still work as provider of unconventional ideas and suggestions for the browsing user.

Further observations and possibilities for investigations The Warburg Institute has been working on the digitisation of its items, and it is a very interesting question to think about: how does this unique library and its unique classification system can be translated into a digital library—*if* that should even be the case? Another issue with sufficient and engaging corpus for inquiry is: to build a more detailed account of the development of the classification system, revealing its changes through time, and its correspondence with the researches being carried out in the Institute; also, a comparison between the classification system of the books and the organisation scheme of the photography collection that the Institute also holds. Warburg's last and unfinished project, the *Mnemosyne*, which is a series of dozens of wooden panels displaying 'collages' of all kinds of images from his research, could be further investigated as a way of better understanding the classification system as well.

■

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