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**Gertrud Bing
erede di Warburg**

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Gertrud Bing erede di Warburg

a cura di
Monica Centanni e Daniela Sacco

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Sommario

- 7 *Gertrud Bing erede di Warburg. Editoriale*
Monica Centanni e Daniela Sacco
- 15 *Notes on the Warburg Library*
Gertrud Bing
- 25 *Il Warburg Institute e gli studi umanistici.*
Dr. Bing's address, Convegno di Studi sull'Umanesimo
(La Mendola, 27 agosto 1956)
Gertrud Bing, edizione e prefazione a cura di Elisa Del Prete
- 43 *Gertrud Bing-Eugenio Garin, Epistolario 1949-1963.*
Con un gruppo di cinque lettere tra Frances Yates
ed Eugenio Garin (1948)
a cura di Vittoria Magnoler
- 87 *Gertrud Bing 1892-1964. In memoriam*
by Ernst Gombrich
- 131 *In memoriam Gertrud Bing*
Donald Gordon, edizione, traduzione e postfazione
a cura di Chiara Velicogna
- 167 *The Unforgettable Gertrude Bing*
Kurt W. Forster (English version e traduzione italiana)
- 179 *Gertrud Bing. Bibliografia delle opere e della letteratura critica*
(in Appendice, una Nota biografica)
a cura di Monica Centanni e Elisa Del Prete
- 189 *Un giunto energetico per la Scienza della cultura.*
Presentazione di: Kurt W. Forster, Il metodo di Aby Warburg.
L'antico dei gesti, il futuro della memoria,
Edizioni Engramma, Venezia 2021
curatela e traduzione di Giulia Bordignon
- 209 *Presentazione di: Mary Warburg, geb. Hertz.*
Ein kurzes Porträt der vergessenen Künstlerin
Bärbel Hedinger und Michael Diers
- 225 *Bibliography.*
Works by Aby Warburg and secondary Literature
edited by Lucrezia Not

The Unforgettable Gertrude Bing

Kurt W. Forster

A young student from Zurich who had only lived in Berlin and Munich for any length of time away from home, I packed my papers and went to London for the Summer of 1959. Preparing my thesis on the Florentine painter Jacopo Pontormo, I was casually familiar with Italy but much better acquainted with London where I had been sent in the last year of high school to erase consistently bad marks in English. Like so many of my contemporaries, only the French language held out the promise of an intellectual life one could aspire to in a country of mountains that harbored antiquated hotels and train tunnels. Ever since my first month in London (1954), just after food rationing ended, I managed to justify some return visits to my father who suspected some British ploy in the attraction I suddenly felt for the Island that was held in universal esteem for defeating Germany. Within a few days of my first visit, London completely upset my adolescent view of culture, made me relinquish my infatuation with France, and turn instead to the poetry of T.S. Eliot and the concert programs at the Wigmore Hall. My budget did not allow for more than the Lyons Tea Houses but the Museums were immense and one entered them free of charge. Their cafeterias were even worse but the conservative display of art put full trust in the works. The paintings I came to love were the Pontormos then still at Henfield (Sussex), *Totes Meer* by Paul Nash, and the *Moroccan Garden* by Matisse at the Tate. Where else could one find a desk, a richly stocked library, and the immense treasures of the British Library around the corner but at the newly housed Warburg Institute in Woburn Square?

There, at one of the austere reading desks, I was allowed to set up shop, assemble books (and leave a piece of cardboard with my name in their place on the shelves), and pour over them copying everything by hand. No

mechanical copying technology was available. Corresponding to an entirely personal effort of copying, the open floors on which one went to look for any book one wished to examine required the thread of Ariadne. The Institute's floors – except for the basement with the conventional array of journal literature – sucked one into an endless labyrinth. After an initial urge, time slowed to the pace of turning pages, then to a crawl from one shelf to another, only to expire at the closing hour when one had to bid good night to one's study carrel.

I was at the Warburg Institute for a couple of weeks when the sinking feeling set in that I would never be able to finish my work before having to return to Zurich in the Fall. Everything had been set up for efficiency: I was staying in the student digs on Tavistock Road, I never missed a moment during the Institute's opening hours, I spent weekends at the Museums and evenings at concerts, yet the dimensions of my subject began to dawn on me only as I tried to grapple with the problems of Mannerism as they were then debated, decades after they had been broached in the interwar years. I felt at sea, unwilling to adopt the terms in which "Mannerist art" was being construed, yet recognizing that "other" terms were needed to fashion a view of art that made room for what was mislabeled as a manifestation of "distortion," "alienation" or "anxiety." These were the terms used to account for illogical or upsetting traits in art and architecture of Pontormo's times (1494-1556), both in Italy and in the North. Long fascinated by Albrecht Dürer (whose woodcuts regularly appeared on the pages of the popular press in my youth), I came across an essay on "Heidnische Weissagungen zu Luthers Zeiten". I was dumbfounded and wondered about astrological aspects of Florentine art, discovering that Cosimo I had a court astrologer and that important events and the constellations of their occurrence held many a mind captive.

Just when I was losing my way in the midst of these divagations, one late morning, a lady bent over me and said, quite near my ear, "Na, junger Mann, was machen Sie hier?" [*Well, young man, what are you up to?*] Not in years had anyone approached me so straightforwardly and yet so unexpectedly that it took me a moment to give an answer. The lady was Gertrud Bing, then in the last months of her directorship at the Warburg Institute. I had been told about her by the scholar who had accepted me as a reader and issued me a card, but I knew nothing about her in my

ignorance of both the Warburg Institute and its history, never having heard the name Warburg from anyone in all my years as a student in Berlin, Munich, and Zurich, much less had I taken notice of her editorship of Warburg's *Gesammelte Schriften* which, before I tracked down the study of astrological portends on broadsheets and in prognostications, had been a book with seven seals for me. Bing had a head of short-cropped but full hair, vivid eyes behind her round glasses, and, as she walked away with ease, a gait that gave off a youthful energy. From then on, I never missed, even at a distance and from one floor to another, what appeared to me to be the joyous clapping of her heels.

As Bing was waiting to hear about my plans, I stammered on for a while until she asked me to her office and I had a chance to gather my thoughts. I claimed, vaguely, to be interested in the anthropology of mannerism, in the milieu of those Florentine painters in their reclusive quarters and in the Saturnine spirit of a Pontormo who was criticized by Vasari for his behavior and for his misanthropic inclination. When I mentioned Warburg's study of "Heidnische Weissagungen" her face lit up – unexpected in one whose brightness was palpable anyway – and, rather than belaboring the point, she quickly added that I should persist in my interest. Our conversation ended on this gentle note of encouragement as I had never received from any of my previous teachers at university. Their usual comments were to be taken as "corrections" and "instructions" while Bing's conveyed a different spirit: her words were colored by surprise (that I should have brought up that essay of Warburg's) and her encouragement was precisely that, as if she said "I didn't expect you to bring this to me, but since you did, make something of it."

Bing's words sprang from a deep understanding of scholarly interests and, perhaps even more remarkably, from a fine intuition about the always problematic relationship between scholarship and personal life. If I'm able to say that fifty years after the Summer of 1959, in the Fall of 1999, I published the English edition of Aby Warburg's Writings [*The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity. Contributions to the Cultural History of the European Renaissance*, introduction by Kurt W. Forster, translation by David Britt, Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 1999], it feels less a personal accomplishment than the fulfillment of a prophecy that had never been made. This edition, up to then the heftiest volume in the series *Texts &*

Documents that I initiated at the Getty Research Institute, was, for me, a way of reckoning with Summer 1959, when one of those rarest of encounters took place that not only brings two minds into correspondence but also two scholarly explorations to a conjunction. As if one could fancy a sort of hopscotch of the discipline, a sense of concatenation between Warburg's last stay in Rome and his lecture at the Hertziana Library in 1929, to the end of Bing's directorship of the Warburg Institute in 1959, and on to the English edition of that sleeper of scholarship, the mix of Bing's encouragement (obviously, after many discouragements) and her own sense of "unfinished business" with Warburg sallies forth.

The respect I felt for Gertrud Bing made me recall another youthful experience that had given me a sense of being favored by chance: in high school, I opted for Latin lessons, and I was, from the start, captivated by my teacher Marie-Louise von Franz. The school was located between the villa of C.G. Jung in Küsnacht and the modest lakeside house of von Franz who usually arrived for our lessons in an old Balilla convertible she brought to a halt within inches of the school building, only to run upstairs, throw the textbook on the front desk and begin the day's lesson in staccato delivery but with infinite patience for our halting efforts to put Latin phrases together, or, more often, take them apart and look for the all-important verb that might organize their meaning.

Whenever Gertrud Bing was mentioned, it was as Warburg's research assistant and a colleague of Fritz Saxl, unfairly qualifying her true role, not unlike the substantial contribution Marie-Louise von Franz made to Jung's work, including her biography of the "great man." Marie-Louise von Franz was a good deal younger than Gertrud Bing but an equally powerful person, very practical-minded and yet wise in her insight into human nature. She made me understand how the bourgeois milieu of my upbringing blinded me to certain things, even things in myself, and that I had to reckon with the fact and *do* something about, just as many years later but with equal timeliness, Bing alerted me to possibilities in scholarship my conventional postwar studies with such professors as Hans Sedlmayr (Munich), Gotthard Jedlicka and Peter Meyer (Zurich) had left as gaping holes. Bing, by taking a moment away from her responsibilities and generously addressing a few words to a complete unknown, changed not

just the way I went about my business but potentially enabled me to be wary of the way “business as usual” was conducted in art-historical scholarship. It took time to correct course, especially in the United States – where, to be sure, an elite of European art historians had emigrated and established a dominion that is still facing challenges.

English abstract

In this text, Kurt W. Forster recalls first meeting Gertrud Bing as a young student from Zurich when he visited the Warburg Institute in London. His personal recollection of this important encounter is also accompanied by his recollection of another - with Marie-Louise von Franz, a pupil and collaborator of C. G. Jung, a woman whose personal profile is comparable to that of Bing.

keywords | Gertrud Bing; Warburg Institute; Marie-Louise von Franz.

Table of matters

Abbreviations

Works by Aby M. Warburg

Essays, Articles, and Conferences

Posthumous Editions

Collected Works and Translations

Online Editions

Mnemosyne Atlas

Editions

Warburg's Introduction to Mnemosyne Atlas

On the Geburtstagsatlas by E.H. Gombrich (1937)

Critical Review

Readings of the single Panels

Mnemosyne exhibitions

Online Editions

Selected Topics

On the KBW Library and the Warburg Institute

On travel to North America and visits to Pueblo sites

On sojourn at Kreuzlingen

On "A Lecture on Serpent Ritual"

On Correspondence, Diaries, and Fragments

Conferences

Dedicated Journal Issues

Works by and on Gertrud Bing

Essays and Articles

Works edited, translated, and curated by Gertrud Bing

Critical Literature

Dedicated Journal Issues

Critical Literature on Warburg, Mnemosyne Atlas, and Warburgkreis

Internet Sources on Warburg and Mnemosyne

Bibliographic Reviews

Bibliographies edited by Seminario Mnemosyne

Other Bibliographies