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edited by Ada Naval and Giulia Zanon

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Sommario

7 *Warburg Bibliothek. Engramma 198, Editorial*
Ada Naval and Giulia Zanon

15 *Warburg Bibliothek. Editoriale di Engramma 198*
Ada Naval e Giulia Zanon

23 *Das Nachleben der Antike. Zur Einfühurung in die Bibliothek Warburg (1921)*
Fritz Saxl

29 *La sopravvivenza dell'antico. Introduzione alla Biblioteca Warburg (1921)*
Fritz Saxl, traduzione di Michela Maguolo

35 *Die Bibliothek Warburg und ihr Ziel (1923)*
Fritz Saxl

49 *La Biblioteca Warburg e il suo fine (1923)*
Fritz Saxl, traduzione di Michela Maguolo

63 *Die Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek Warburg in Hamburg (1930)*
Fritz Saxl

71 *La Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek Warburg in Amburgo (1930)*
Fritz Saxl, traduzione di Michela Maguolo

77 *Notes on the Warburg Library (1934)*
Gertrud Bing

87 *Appunti sulla Biblioteca Warburg (1934)*
Gertrud Bing, traduzione di Giulia Zanon

97 *The Warburg Institute Classification Scheme (1935)*
Edgar Wind

103 *Il sistema di catalogazione del Warburg Institute (1935)*
Edgar Wind, traduzione di Giulia Zanon

109 *The History of Warburg's Library, 1886-1944*
Fritz Saxl

125 *La storia della Biblioteca di Aby Warburg, 1886-1944*
Fritz Saxl, traduzione di Michela Maguolo

141 *Das Warburg Institute (1946)*
Fritz Saxl

145 *L'Istituto Warburg (1946)*
Fritz Saxl, traduzione di Michela Maguolo

149 *Porträt aus Büchern. Stichworte*
Michael Diers
171 *Die Bibliothek Warburg und ihr Forschungsprogramm*
Martin Warnke
179 *Dromenon, as ritualised behaviour. A definition of the Warburg Library's section*
Salvatore Settis
183 *Dromenon, come comportamento ritualizzato. Una definizione della sezione della Biblioteca di Warburg*
Salvatore Settis
187 *Construire des espaces de voisinage. Institution, collectif de recherche et architectonique de la KBW*
Philippe Despoix
219 *Mind, Memory and Museum. Warburg Renaissance Project. An interview with Bill Sherman*
Edited by Ada Naval and Giulia Zanon

The Warburg Institute Classification Scheme (1935)

Edgar Wind

E. Wind, *The Warburg Institute Classification Scheme*, "The Library Association Record" II (1935), 43-45.

A recent article by Dr. Gertrud Bing on the purpose and equipment of the Warburg Institute contains a short reference to the system employed for the classification and pressmarking of books (G. Bing, *The Warburg Institute*, "The Library Association Record" Fourth Series, I, 8, 1934, 262-266. Now published in G. Bing, Notes on the Warburg Library, "La Rivista di Engramma" 177 (novembre 2020), 15-23).

With some librarians, these remarks have aroused so much interest that a fuller statement seems justified. There would be no point, however, in describing such a technical system in detail unless the ulterior purpose for which it was invented were kept in mind. Two traits, in particular, of the Warburg Library will have to be remembered:

1) Within that specialized field of cultural history and psychology which is circumscribed by the 'Survival of the Classics', the Library endeavours to be encyclopedic; 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:—

1) To make inteconnections easily visible.

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

The special class for any book is indicated by three capital letters (e.g. FDB). The book's place within that department is indicated by Arabic figures (e.g. 2075). For purposes of visual orientation each letter is coordinated with one colour so that, corresponding to the three letters which indicate the class, three coloured labels appear at the back of each book. Misplaced books become easily detectable through obvious discrepancies of colour. In the following description I shall only name the letters without referring to the corresponding colours.

The three letters represent three levels of classification. The first letter refers to the most general division of subjects (Art, Religion, etc.); the second letter specifies that general subject by using either 'systematic' or 'historical' differentiations. If it follows the 'systematic' line it leads to one of the sub-classes of the general class (e.g., 'Sculpture' within 'Art in General', or 'Geomancy' within 'Divination'). If it follows the 'historical' line it leads to differentiations of either Period or Country. Thus, the second letter may mean any one of three things (1) special subject; (2) period; (3) country.

Within that range its meaning may be freely chosen according to the main interest of classification; but once it is chosen, it follows that the third letter will be a specification of that meaning along the two remaining lines. Thus, if in the History of Art the second letter indicates the country (Italian Art) the third letter will indicate period and branch of art (Renaissance Sculpture). Again, if the second letter indicates the branch of art (Illuminated MSS.) the third letter will indicate period and country (Mediaeval French). And, finally, if the second letter indicates the period (Early Christian) the third letter will indicate country and branch of art (c.g. Syrian sarcophagi).

There are, however, several limiting cases, which both simplify and enlarge the use of the third letter.

1) Books completely covering the subject which is indicated by the two first letters (e.g. general books on Italian art irrespective of period and branch of art) receive as their third letter the letter for “general” which is the same in all departments (F).

2) Certain departments (e.g. Psychology or Logic of Science) may have a systematic character throughout, so that there is no need for either chronological or geographical differentiation. In that case the second letter would indicate a sub-class of the first, and the third letter again a sub-class of the second. The third letter will then not have the task of combining two forms of differentiation.

3) The Warburg Library has made it a rule to separate “source books”, which present the subject matter in its original form, from writings which treat of that subject historically. Sources of any subject which is indicated by the two first letters receive, therefore, as third letter a particular sign which is the same in all departments (H). The corresponding books are placed *en bloc* at the very beginning of their respective sections.

The proportion of fixed and variable meanings, according to this scheme, may be seen from the following chart :

FIRST LETTER	SECOND LETTER			THIRD LETTER	
General Subject	Period	Country	Special Subject	Further Subdivision of Subject, Period, or Country	Type of Book
D Social Anthropology	Pre-historic A-historic (Folklore)	Ancient Flanders Modern Belgium	variable*	variable**	General Survey
G	Oriental Antiquity				
K	Ancient Greece; Ancient Rome I				
P	Ancient Rome II				
I	Middle Age I				

B Religion	Middle Age II	France	
F Magic and Natural Sciences		Holland	
A Philosophy	Renaissance I (Quattrocento)		
L		Spain	
N Classical Scholarship; Philology		Italy	
O		Switzerland	Source Book
E Belles-Lettres		Germany	
C Fine Arts	Renaissance II (Cinquecento)		
H Political History			
M	17th and 18th cent. 19th and 20th cent. I	England	
R	19th and 20th cent. II		

* The meaning of each letter is dependent upon its connection with the first letter.
** The meaning of each letter is dependent upon its connection with the two first letters.

One of the advantages of the system is that it is flexible enough to adjust to any forthcoming development of research. New sections can be inserted without destroying the arrangement of the old ones. The only order which is absolutely fixed is the one within the smallest unit: Books that have received a number within the group indicated by the third letter can change their place within that group only by being resigned. The group itself, however, can change its place within the larger group indicated by the two first letters without any alterations in the press mark or catalogue. The same holds good for that larger group itself which can move freely within the general department indicated by the first letter. And, finally, the

order of the general departments can also be altered according to need. Though using letters as signs of classification, the system thus escapes the slavery of the order of the alphabet. The only slavery to which it partly succumbs is the one of the sequence of numbers within its smallest unit. I say “partly”; for even here a slight remedy has been found by making each number the sign not of the individual book but of the subject treated by that book, so that books treating the same subject (e.g. the life of Donatello) receive the same number. This has the particular advantage that one can dispense with decimals and fractions. Of course each book has also its individual number, but that is its “number of accession” which does not form part of the press mark and hence can be ignored by the reader.

English abstract

In this contribution, first published in “The Library Association Record” in 1935, Edgar Wind briefly explains the system of classification used in the Warburg Library, listing its merits and the issues that new fields of study will bring to it.

keywords | Warburg Library; Warburg Institute; Classification; Edgar Wind.

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