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Carlotta Santini on Comparing Aby Warburg and Leo Frobenius

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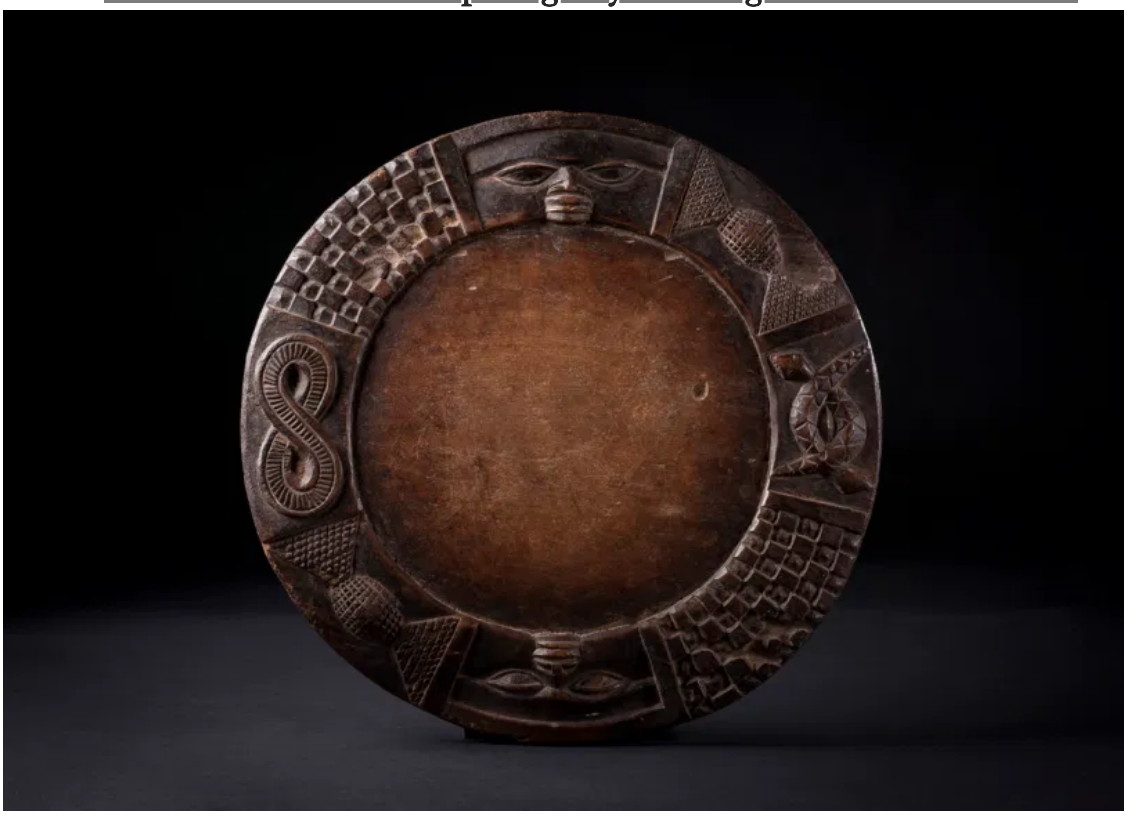

Carlotta Santini is Senior Researcher of the Centre National of Scientific Research (CNRS) at the Ecole Normale Supérieure in Paris. After receiving a PhD in philosophy at the Sorbonne, she worked at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes, the Technical University Berlin, Princeton University, and the CRASSH Institute in Cambridge. Her research interests include the study of German culture between the 18th and 20th centuries (aesthetics, philosophy, literature and anthropology), with a particular focus on the legacy of the classical Greek world. She recently spoke with JHI Blog editor **Anne Schult** about her article **"Searching for Orientation in the History of Culture: Aby Warburg and Leo**

Frobenius on the Morphological Study of the Ifa-Board," < https://muse.jhu.edu/article/761032> which has appeared in the most recent issue (**81.3, July 2020 < https://muse.jhu.edu/issue/42669>**) of the *Journal of the History of Ideas*.

Anne Schult: In your article, you refer to the study of human culture as "one of the most unstable fields of knowledge" in the early 20th century. What caused this instability? In how far can we read the respective methodologies proposed by Warburg and Frobenius as attempts to render it more stable?

Carlotta Santini: The great development of positivism at the end of the 19th century, the extraordinary developments of the exact sciences and techniques that we are still witnessing today, had great influence on the human sciences as well. Throughout the 19th century, the humanities followed a path of specialism, trying to develop rigorous methods in order to achieve a level of scientificity comparable to that of the mathematical and physical sciences.

But it is precisely this stimulating competition with the natural sciences, in highlighting a layer of undecidability, of ineliminable resistance of the world of the spirit to the descriptive rigidity of scientific laws and categories, that allows us, in my opinion, to best evaluate the great potential of the human sciences. Authors like Warburg and Frobenius have been able to describe the extraordinary complexity and articulation, the incessant force of mutation and transformation, in a word the inexhaustible creativity that characterizes the works of the human spirit.

The field of culture in its multiple aspects (history, language, society, religion, art) is undoubtedly the most difficult and richest field of study for a scholar, since its products are practically inexhaustible and the laws of development they obey are continually reformulated. The ambition to transfer the methods of the exact sciences to the field of human studies is perhaps a misconceived ambition. It is not objectivity that we should aspire to, but an understanding that is as broad as possible and takes into account the extent, variety, historical depth, and forward-looking perspectives of cultural development. Such kind of knowledge is perhaps never fully accomplished, but most closely realized in the exercise of knowledge itself: investigation, research, incessant comparison. This is a truly infinite task, however: a researcher in this field can retrace a hundred and more times the same path previously followed by others and nevertheless achieve results never seen before. This is, in my opinion, the great privilege, but also the great risk, faced by all scholars guided by genuine curiosity and intellectual honesty who dedicate themselves to the human sciences.

AS: You suggest that Frobenius and Warburg, though typically considered scholars of anthropology and art history, respectively, "can be most usefully understood as historians of culture." What advantage does this reframing of the relevant disciplinary context offer when analyzing each scholar's work? And how, in turn, do the specific approaches to culture pursued by Frobenius and Warburg enrich our understanding of cultural history?

CS: Anthropology and art history: labels such as these are just attempts to distinguish precise disciplinary fields, with precise methods. These distinctions are certainly legitimate and productive—the history of science bears witness to this—but we must not forget that they are still working hypotheses, diverse and always modifiable approaches to the great field of human knowledge. The terms "anthropology" and "art history" themselves are subject to terminological dispute, and the boundaries of these disciplines are variously defined by the individual scholarly traditions in the different countries in which they are practiced. That said, Frobenius and Warburg enjoy a peculiar reputation within their respective disciplines.

Frobenius was considered a more infamous than famous anthropologist among his colleagues, and Warburg was always cut off, both by his own choice and by the resistance of the academic world, from the academic circles of the nascent field of art history. Warburg and Frobenius themselves, therefore, refused to be confined to the restricted scope of their respective disciplines and, each for their part, formulated a broader definition of their individual quests for knowledge. Declaring themselves, as Burckhardt before them, as researchers of culture (cultural science, cultural history, cultural morphology are some of the possible definitions of this macrodiscipline), they do not deny the specificity of the methods of their original disciplines, but rather claim a wider validity to these same methods. Frobenius was certainly a brilliant anthropologist, but as a historian of culture, he perhaps represents the accomplished image of an *ideal* anthropologist. Anthropology is the science of man and, by definition, does not exclude anything concerning man. It therefore contains a bit of history and a bit of archaeology, of science of religions and sociology, of ethnography and geography, and of economics and mathematics.

Warburg, for his part, was undeniably a brilliant art historian, capable of channeling original methods into the study of artistic heritage. But for Warburg, art was the form of man's expressive capacity *par excellence*. From this point of view, the whole history of culture is an integral part of art history, since it is the story of how man creatively expresses his relationship with the world, his "being in the world," in physical and ideal images.

In choosing to define these scholars just as they have defined themselves on several occasions, i.e. as historians of culture, I therefore do not intend to introduce a further disciplinary distinction. The legitimacy of this definition rests precisely in its extension and extensibility, in its resistance to any form of limitation. The history of culture, more so than being a discipline, constitutes a perspective on the history of knowledge, on the history of mankind in general. Giambattista Vico called it the "new science," and the legitimate object of this science is all that pertains to the realm of human action in the world. The epistemological spectrum of this discipline is therefore vast, since everything that man has created, worked toward, thought, and conceived of is included in it, and all the methods of the specialized disciplines are potentially included in it as well.

AS: Your article revolves around Frobenius' and Warburg's differing interpretations of the *Ifa* boards found among the Yoruba, a population that had settled along the great bend of the Niger River in West Africa. Apart from the methodological dispute between the two scholars, how does their shared analysis of this particular cultural artifact fit into the broader history of late 19th to early 20th-century German colonialism and the archives and kinds of knowledge it produced?

CS: I have chosen to focus on their interpretations of the *Ifa* board because it offers a very specific example not only of the application of their respective methods, but also of the difficulties of the intellectual and ideological context in which they were situated. As I point out in my article, Frobenius' position, regardless of its validity, was in strong contrast to mainstream theories within African Studies at the end of the nineteenth century. As is well known, African Studies were considered a subsection of Orientalist Studies for a long time because of the pre-eminence attributed to Arab culture, which was counted among the "superior cultures" at the time. Within this context, Frobenius emerged as the first and most passionate champion of the study of Sub-Saharan African cultures. He recognized a very high level of autonomy and originality in Central and South African cultures, which he himself compared to and indeed deemed superior to classical Greek culture. Many scholars have reported that the historical context in which Frobenius' research took place was the more general one of Prussian colonialist enterprise in Africa. But Frobenius did not approach local cultures from the viewpoint of cultural superiority. He studied African cultures with the conviction that he had reached the most authentic source of what we call culture. His passion for Sub-Saharan Africa was a real cognitive passion, with which he intended to bring the peripheral "Africa

without history" back to the center and indeed conceive of it as the apex of cultural history.

Although not directly comparable to Frobenius' admiration of African culture, Warburg's attitude towards the Hopi Indians living in the American *pueblos* was also not driven by the paternalistic and utilitarian attitude of colonial science. He visited these regions with the desire to move away from the American East Coast environment, which had ended up exhausting him with its homologation of thought. It is therefore in search of an alternative to the dominant style of thought, to the Western intellectual elite, that Warburg approached the culture of the Hopi. However, a proclaimed absence of prejudice—and this is valid for both Warburg and Frobenius—did not mean abdicating their position as European observers. Through the study of foreign cultures, both authors tried as much to understand their specificity and uniqueness as to find elements of connection with their own culture. For both, the study of culture was a field of investigation that had to be conceived of on a world scale: none of the singular cultures could be said to be impermeable to others, or the repository of a higher truth. The study of particularities, of analogies as much as of differences, was functional to the more ambitious purpose of deriving a total understanding of the dynamics of common human experience on earth.

Featured Image: Ifa divination tray. Yoruba, Nigeria. Wood. W. 32.8 cm. Inv. 1011-74d. **Musée Barbier-Mueller < https://www.barbier-mueller.ch/en/2019/10/17/exhibition-gods-directions-for-use/>** , photo Luis Lourenço.