

The Narrative History of “Visualization”: The Value of Bookhart and Warburg’s Imagology Research

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As various visual images, they can carry the function of recording and narrating history. Scholars from different fields will provide different interpretations of the same visual work within their own temporal and spatial perspectives, or supplement the connotations and extensions of the cultural, sociological, and many other aspects of them or their era’s imagery. Jacob Burckhardt (1818-1897), an outstanding cultural historian in 19th century Switzerland, made his own understanding and interpretation of iconography from the perspective of cultural history; Aby Warburg (1866-1929), an outstanding German art historian and cultural historian of the 20th century, hoped that his research on art history could provide a methodological reference for later generations in terms of material or spatial expansion. Whether through cultural or artistic history approaches, these great scholars in history have provided valuable epistemological perspectives for our academic research from the perspective of iconography, providing us with more academic perspectives and methodological possibilities for studying history and understanding the world.

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The “visible narrative history” refers to the narrative history of images, with “visible” as the signifier and “narrative history” as the signifier, which is the narrative interpretation of visualized images. In Peter Burke’s *Eyewitnessing: The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence*, the author provides us with a clear outline of how images are narrated in the historical process and through what forms they play their social role. We clearly felt the interpretation and application of the concept of “visible narrative history” by the two art historians from the perspective of iconography in the fields of culture and art, both in Burckhardt’s speech “Reflections on History” and in Warburg’s research on “Italian Art and International Astrology in the Schifano Palace”. Through the study of the works of two historians, the author deeply feels and understands the social functions carried by images as a narrative.

The Possibility of Narration

Peter Burke stated in his introduction to *Eyewitnessing: The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence* that the content of this book is about how to use images as historical evidence, in short, to use images to verify history. At the beginning of Chapter 8, “The History of Visible Narrative”, he pointed out that “each portrait narrates a story” (Burke, 2018, p. 140). This makes us understand that in addition to its visual value itself, artistic works naturally carry the instinct to narrate stories, that is, the signifier of “the history of visible narrative”. It is not

difficult for us to understand that “visual narrative history” is studied from the perspective of iconography, which combines visual and historical characteristics.

In Peter Burke’s view, image is a broad concept that includes various paintings, sculptures, photography, as well as film and television footage, as well as various handicrafts, postcards, commemorative badges, as well as maps and architecture. His definition encompasses the scope of images from both two-dimensional and three-dimensional spaces, enriching the artistic style of research and broadening the scope of research.

Meg Ponty also said, “Painting brings us back to the view of things themselves” (2019, p. 75). If every painting represents a narrative, representing our view of things and materials, as well as our view of the times we are in, then the objects we observe in a certain historical time and space will inevitably present a developing and “visible narrative history”. In this way, the forms and categories of artistic expression defined by Peter Burke naturally have the possibility of narration and the function of historical proof.

By using images to prove history, this raises the question: How do these images exert their social role? If all images can prove history, can everyone become a narrator of history in the events of their own era?

We can find good examples of these in the imaging studies of Buckhart and Warburg.

Visible Narrative

Buckhart’s “Visible Narrative History”

Method and characteristics. Firstly, on the issue of human origin, Buckhart believed that there was no way to trace it. He realized that the historical narratives developed in the 19th century had obvious limitations, as they were unfolded in chronological order, with the disadvantage of not reflecting the complexity of history, which we face as having multiple levels and facets. So, in Buckhart’s writing of history, he emphasized and highlighted the characteristics of hierarchy, which also provided readers with a logical framework of horizontal comparison and vertical connection.

Secondly, he advocated selecting a cross-section of history for research, that is, “replacing the diachronic model used in traditional narrative with a synchronic model of historical analysis cross-section” (Fan, 2003, p. 162). We will not attempt to form a system or claim “historical principles”. On the contrary, we will only observe and select historical cross-sections in as many directions as possible (Fan, 2003, p. 167). Specifically, Buckhart advocated the use of cross-sectional research methods, that is, from point to surface, through one or more cross-sectional planes to gain a glimpse of the core of history, in other words, using visual works, from different perspectives, to understand historical figures, events, and social and living environments from different perspectives.

Thirdly, what Buckhart called the history of civilization first refers to a contemplation of world history at the spiritual level. It is believed that the state, religion, and culture are the three great forces (i.e., the three historical potentials) that comprehensively and deeply understand the process of historical evolution. Among them, the state and religion constitute the external representation of human political and spiritual needs, while culture is reflected in the influence of human material life on their spiritual activities and states. It can also be said that Buckhart’s view on the history of civilization corresponds to three instinctual “needs” of humanity, namely: political needs, transcendental needs, and spiritual needs. From this, we can see that Buckhart restored the three elements of civilization to human natural needs, put people first, and highlighted human subjectivity, which is a forward-looking and progressive view of civilization.

Buckhart examined and cared about the phenomenon of “civilization” in the process of world history from the perspective of the interrelationships between state, religion, and culture. This reminds us that he should consciously abandon the popular linear historical research method of “strictly following the chronological order”. It is not difficult to see that his concept of civilization history is focused on highlighting the historical complexity of the “civilization” phenomenon itself and pursuing. Extracting the value of human immortality is very different from the popular enlightenment style view of civilization history at that time, which simply viewed various opposing relationships between “civilization” and “nature”, “civilization” and “barbarism” from a linear historical model.

Specific methods and cases. In *Reflections on History*, Buckhart used various images to interpret “visible narrative history” from the perspectives of religion, culture, and country.

In terms of “religion” and “culture”, Buckhart insisted on the combination of history and theology. His research object is St. Augustine’s *The City of God*, which is the first philosophical work on the history of the Church and the most important classic work of late Augustine that integrates his lifelong main ideas. The core idea of this work is to develop and establish the concept of historical time in the Middle Ages and the theoretical system of Christian world history, which will lay the foundation for later medieval historical research.

Augustine’s philosophy in *The City of God* is that art should abandon the real world and reflect God and serve God, with the ultimate goal of serving religion. Therefore, the function of plastic arts lies in the fact that the decoration, poetry, and music of churches should all be a praise of God, and the divine edict contained in works becomes the ultimate goal of people’s aesthetic appreciation. These ideas place religion above culture and art, and culture and art are subordinate to religion. We can feel this academic proposition from his research on Aeschylus’ *Prometheus Bound*. Buckhart also adhered to the cognitive attitude of “social statics”, believing that the origin and endpoint of humanity are unknown and untraceable. Therefore, many inlays are a manifestation of the spirit of nations and civilizations.

On the “national” side, Buckhart opposed subjective opposition and distinction between the state and the nation, and also opposed mixing the two together. He believed that the concept of the state is “violence”, while the concept of the nation is “historical phenomenon”. Buckhart once said, “The conclusions drawn from nation to nation or from race to race are of little value”. He used the kingdom of Menis in Egypt as an example to illustrate a long and great period of previous history, outlining a clear picture of civilization from a visual perspective.

Walburg’s “Visible Narrative History”

Academic viewpoints and characteristics. The study of the early Renaissance period is the focus of Walburg’s iconography research. He gave a paper speech on “Italian Art and International Astrology” in the Palazzo Palazzo Ferraris at the International Congress of Art History held in Rome in 1912. In this speech, the term “imageology” was first mentioned, and from then on, imageology was officially proposed and widely used as a method of art research. Therefore, Walburg is known as the founder of modern iconography.

Walburg condemned the writing method of art history because it felt that it was written by experts, with a narrow perspective and only focused on the so-called masters. These collections and studies were insufficient historical materials and did not represent the true evolution of history, nor did they provide sufficient and valuable materials for the study of art history.

Analyzing and exploring the deep content or meaning of images, understanding and interpreting them from the perspective of concepts or symbols, as well as their transmission and transformation in the history of images and culture, especially in his later years in Warburg, he made text and images his main research methods.

Specific methods and cases. Pathoformel (Fan, 2003, p. 402) is a concept proposed by Walburg in tracing back to the classical motif and describing actions. He found that the depiction of action in the early Renaissance was based on classical prototypes, so Walburg paid great attention to the depiction of action. In 1891, Walburg completed his doctoral theses on Botticelli’s “Spring” and “The Birth of Venus”. In this paper, we can see his interpretation and argumentation of the academic viewpoint of “classical afterlife”, mainly studying the theme of Botticelli’s works, the three goddesses of the United States and China. In addition, in the study of the clothing and hair of the three goddesses of beauty and beauty, we clearly feel that Walburg spoke within the scope of cultural history research.

The “Good Neighbor Rule” (Fan, 2003, p. 608): This principle is Walburg’s work and narrative style, which focuses on the value of the books on the bookshelf and the complementary content information between adjacent books. The direction of Walburg’s research method is to expand the framework of the research object and study individual images in specific contexts.

Research on cultural psychology: Walburg’s research on “Italian art and international astrology in the Schifano Palace” has become an important channel for us to understand Walburg’s academic ideas, and this research is based on his in-depth research on cultural psychology. Firstly, he studied astrology from the perspective of “cultural psychology”, which represents the irrational fear of primitive people. The earliest research on cultural psychology can be traced back to his paper writing on “Francesco Sassetti’s Will”. Secondly, a hierarchical study was conducted on the frescoes of the Scefano Palace using the method of iconography: The lowest level represents the life of the Ferrara court on the ground, the middle level represents the indirect astrological demon—Tendon, and the top level is the Olympian deity. Thirdly, a specific interpretation and study of astrology and the imagery of the months and constellations in the zodiac.

Walburg’s research and interpretation of the frescoes in the Schifano Palace allowed him to break free from the narrowness and limitations of art history. He explained the image of Ferrara’s astrology as the decline of classical heritage, from which the Renaissance had to rescue humanity (Fan, 2003, p. 451). From this, we can see that his research is based on a cultural dimension that delves deeply into visual images.

The Meaning of “Visible Narrative History”

The significance of cultural history: Compared to art history, Bookhart leans more towards cultural history, but we can see that his research on cultural history comes from the study and practice of art history. Buckhart focused on cross-sectional studies of history in cultural studies, attempting to reconstruct the past in every detail. In addition to pursuing the Renaissance, he also expanded his research scope to the world stage. Buckhart particularly valued people’s spiritual and metaphysical needs, and his work *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* has a very valuable reference for future scholars in studying the psychology of an era. The significance of Walburg’s cultural history lies firstly in his lifelong focus on overcoming fear as the key to interpreting Renaissance culture. Secondly, he hopes to integrate various scattered disciplines to form a broad and comprehensive cultural science. Thirdly, he explores and traces the connotation of visual images at the cultural level.

The significance of art history: In the study of art history, as an art historian who places great emphasis on “style”, Buckhart’s value lies in his belief in the importance of art in understanding the past. Walburg extended the methodological significance for later researchers in art history, both in terms of material and spatial expansion, in specific image research. He believed that Potticelli’s changes in the subject matter helped him form his own unique new style of ideal human nature. Imagologist Chen Huaian (2011) commented on the significance of the art history of “Italian Art and International Astrology in the Schifano Palace”: This paper not only successfully unraveled the secret symbols of images during the Renaissance, but also reversed the research direction of art history that prioritized the concept of 20th century style history.

In short, as a “visual narrative history”, images can allow us to witness past religions, beliefs, politics, various social forms, and visual representations in various social lives, whether from a cultural or artistic perspective, especially inspiring us to imagine the past more vividly.

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