

Florence 1900. The Quest for Arcadia

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In the words of its author, this engaging book ‘tells of the shadows of objects and of images in the brain and, as such, of the only realities that cannot entirely escape from appropriation’ (p. ix). The object in question is Florence, understood both as a material place and as a mythical construction. The appropriating subjects are the many expatriates who chose the Tuscan city as their temporary or permanent place of residence at a pivotal moment in Europe’s intellectual and social history – the turn of the 20th century. At its most general level, this is a book about the genealogies of perception – that is, about the multiple sensorial and narrative experiences that go into making up individual and collective understandings of a particular place, with its contentious history and contradictory present. Bernd Roeck deals here with the cognitive pathways through which narratives of time and place come together to forge *genius loci*, the ineffable ‘spirit of place’ to which Vernon Lee, one of Florence’s most famous expatriates, devoted one of her works. To make this inquiry methodologically more manageable, Roeck focuses on one person’s experience of past and contemporary Florence, the enormously influential German art historian Aby Warburg, who left Hamburg in 1897 to live in the Tuscan city for the next seven years with his wife, aspiring artist Mary Hertz.

Interdisciplinary in its conception and intended audience, Roeck’s book will be of interest to a variety of scholarly communities. Indeed, the book’s lively writing style and anecdotal richness make it accessible and enjoyable to a non-scholarly public as well. To the social historian the book’s appeal lies primarily in its analysis of a particular moment in the history of travel and in its ability to link travel and tourism to a wide variety of social and cultural trends. The upper-class foreigners who visited and resided in Florence at the turn of the 20th century knew themselves to be witnessing the end of the kind of aristocratic traveling that had begun two centuries before and the dawn of tourism as a mass phenomenon, accessible to increasing numbers of people intent on ‘consuming places’. Indeed, the advent of mass society and its rituals provided

Florence's expatriates with both the despised context against which they contrasted their lofty aspirations and the sense of impending doom which made their sensibilities all the more precious and unique.

The cultural and intellectual historian will especially appreciate Roeck's discussion and illustration of Florence as a mirror of modernity, onto which generations of cultivated Europeans projected their anxieties and hopes only to see them reflected as images of their irreparably ruptured selves. In this sense, their quest for Arcadia – that is, for a reprieve from, and counter-narrative to, the inevitability of modernity – could not but fail. After all, paradoxically, many of these Arcadia-searching expatriates were some of modernity's most vocal harbingers. Central to these uneasy negotiations was art, both as an aesthetic realm supposedly removed and distinct from other more mundane pursuits, and as the very benchmark on which social distinction and even economic success could rely. Admired, mythologized, imitated, collected, sold, and endlessly discussed, the art of the Florentine Renaissance embodied the contradictions of the modern era – no less when, as with Warburg, it became the object of scientific inquiry. The art historian will relish Roeck's expert interpretation of these complexities.

Structurally, the book navigates quite different levels and registers, sometimes with admirable panache and at other times with a degree of awkwardness. The first four chapters seem to be a prelude to a relatively straightforward biography of Warburg, from his golden childhood as the heir to one of Hamburg's richest Jewish families through his troubled adolescence and soothing encounter with Italian art, and finally to his agonizing decision to marry outside of his religion and above his social status, to his parents' chagrin, and his move to Florence after renouncing any right over the management of his family's banking empire in exchange for a sizable allowance. After this biographical section, Roeck sets out to relate Warburg's experiences in Florence to those of the town's many other expatriates. Relying primarily on his journal and correspondence, several short chapters introduce the reader to Warburg's network of friends and acquaintances, starting with Florence's small but highly influential community of German speakers. Close attention is devoted to Jessie Hillebrand, widow of author Karl and putative matron of the community; writer Isolde Kuntz and her mentor, Paul Heyse; historian Robert Davidsohn; Belgian art historian Jacques Mesnil; Dutch Germanist André Jolles; sculptor Adolf von Hildebrand; and Swiss painter Arnold Böcklin, whose funeral Warburg attended in 1901. From this central well of relatively tight relationships, the narrative spills over into many rivulets, flowing back to the times of Jakob Burckhardt or sideways to recount the often fascinating impressions of Florence by the crème of the German-speaking intelligentsia, from Rilke to Freud.

But German speakers represented only a minority of Florence's expatriates and visitors, most of whom were British and American. Roeck discusses in detail the lives and work of several of them, from British writer Vernon Lee to American art collector and connoisseur Bernard Berenson, even though Warburg never met Lee in person and barely knew (but heartily despised) Berenson. This incongruence runs through the book's entirety: Warburg gains center stage or disappears from view without much of a warning and without following a clearly intelligible rationale. If Florence was indeed a mirror, however unfaithful and distorting, as Roeck argues in the introduction, it becomes imperative that readers be told from whose perspective the narrative unfolds and whose perception is being discussed. Instead, points of view change rather abruptly and arbitrarily, as if the author wavered between a traditional biography, a community study told from multiple perspectives, a place-centered history, and a 'scientific' work of social or intellectual history told from the standpoint of the omniscient historian. Such perspectival multiplicity is a common, perhaps even necessary, element of any work of history, but in this case, given the subject matter, I felt the need for more rigor and reflexivity.

Similar potentialities and contradictions inform another uneasy tension that runs through the book, the one between the expatriates' images and perceptions of Florence on the one hand and modern Florence as it was being experienced by fin-de-siècle Florentines on the other. Roeck must be applauded for trying to incorporate the locals' experiences and for repeatedly reminding the reader that beneath (or maybe above) the fetishistic love for Renaissance art and the sore disappointments and petty neuroses of the foreigners living in Florence, there was an actual city where people struggled, worked, and dreamt dreams of a very different tenor. For example, he devotes an entire chapter to the riots of May 1898, which swept over much of Italy in the wake of hikes in the price of bread and did not even spare Piazza della Signoria, where Rilke

witnessed angry youths throw stones at the Loggia dei Lanzi. But, as Roeck points out, ‘one looks in vain in the diaries and letters of visitors to Florence for signs of the bloody uprising of May 1898’ (p. 117), and Warburg was especially silent about these events, aside from a couple of dismissive comments on the mischief caused by a few socialists.

Roeck also dutifully informs the reader of the city’s main demographic and economic changes, also completely ignored by Warburg and most other visitors. Even more strikingly, even though Warburg prided himself for having mastered the Tuscan vernacular down to the last aspired sound, he was, like many of the other foreigners, supremely uncurious about the cultural life of the city where he had chosen to live. In all the years spent in Florence, he got to know well only one local artist, Giorgio Kienerk. Nevertheless, Roeck devotes several sections of the book to the cultural life of fin-de-siècle Florence, portrayed in captivating prose and with an eye for the mundane but telling detail. He even devotes a chapter to the aftermath of the 1880s reconstruction (or destruction) of the city center, which had led to the opening up of incongruous squares and boulevards where medieval alleys had stood for centuries. In the late 1890s and early 1900s a vocal debate opened up about the destiny of other parts of the city, especially Borgo San Jacopo in the Oltrarno. Many foreigners residing in Florence, including Vernon Lee and British art collector Herbert Horne, participated actively in this controversy, trying to make a case for conservation. Indeed, their campaign might have crucially contributed to the defeat of the developers. Again, however, Warburg did not join the campaigners, although he seems to have been sympathetic to their cause.

As a study in the genealogies of perception, this book must indeed deal with perception’s limits as well. What the foreigners chose to ignore or were not equipped to perceive is of obvious relevance. Roeck, however, tends to equate the Florence of the Florentines with ‘reality’ and with the social bedrock of falling mortality rates and labor market statistics, to which the images and shadows of the foreigners’ perceptual world can be implicitly contrasted. In other words, Roeck does not treat the foreigners’ gaze and the locals’ perspectives symmetrically, and thus he fails to put in dialogue different perceptions of modernity as they interacted in one rapidly changing city. This seems a missed opportunity and it would have made for a more original and innovative book.

Roeck also builds on the sizable literature on Warburg’s scholarship by focusing on his understanding of the Florentine Renaissance as it evolved in loco. Hostile to the facile romanticization and commodification of the early Renaissance that had taken Europe by storm under the influence of the Pre-Raphaelites, Warburg set out to carry forward Burckhardt’s tradition of exacting scholarship. Whether discussing Leonardo’s Mona Lisa or contributing to the canonization of Piero della Francesca, the subjects of one of the book’s chapters, Warburg centered his interpretations on the historically grounded rediscovery by Renaissance artists of classical elegance, harmony, and balance. Roeck gives a psychological reading of Warburg’s perception of these works, arguing that the peace and balance found in art provided solace and hope to the historian’s self-diagnosed ‘neurasthenic’ personality and, by extension, to the neuroses of the times. Of this peace and balance, Roeck observes, there was precious little in fin-de-siècle Florence itself, which had a very high suicide rate.

Roeck explores the tension between scholarly detachment and embodied (and therefore emotionally laden) perception in another chapter, which focuses on a 1900 exchange of letters between Warburg and Jolles with regards to a particular figure in Ghirlandaio’s frescos in Santa Maria Novella, a servant girl seemingly storming into the room where John the Baptist is born with a tray of fruit on her head. Whereas for Jolles this ‘*ninfa fiorentina*’ is a source of pure aesthetic pleasure capable of making the observer ‘lose his reason’, for Warburg she is the occasion for the first illustration of his celebrated iconographical methodology: the servant is a classical nymph, a motif that has survived the Middle Ages to be resurrected as a symbol of the impending secularization of art. Roeck points out that this seemingly detached methodology was rooted in unpalatable notions of ‘racial memory’ that resonated with the era’s pervasive scientism and evolutionism. And while Warburg was eager to celebrate the *ninfa fiorentina*’s Dionysian qualities, he remained profoundly uneasy with arguably similar displays of unfettered eroticism in his own time. No friend of women’s emancipation, he found the dancing of modern-day nymph Isadora Duncan ‘too stupid for words’ (p. 227). As this discussion shows, Roeck does not provide a systematic analysis of Warburg’s thought, but

rather a series of finely drawn vignettes, which the Warburg specialist will find most instructive but which may leave the uninitiated somewhat puzzled. In this case, a quick look at one of Warburg's biographies, such as Ernst Gombrich's, might be helpful.[\(1\)](#)

Stewart Spencer's translation is often sublime and a true pleasure to read, though this reader wishes a more careful Italian speaker had revised the final draft, for there are several irritating linguistic mistakes. Quibbles aside, however, this is an ambitious work with plenty of exciting historical findings and insightful interpretations. Each of the book's 17 short chapters provides a differently angled portrayal of what happened to people who set out to search for a different temporality by relocating to a place that was haunted by the shadows of their fears and aspirations. After a few years, Warburg was overtaken by a sense of claustrophobia so strong that all he could utter was a blunt 'I hate Italy' (p. 237). In the end, the most sensitive among the Florence expatriates realized that the images and shadows they had appropriated so voraciously could not be forced to tell one coherent, comforting story.

Notes

1. E. H. Gombrich, *Aby Warburg: An Intellectual Biography* (Oxford, 1986).[Back to \(1\)](#)

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