

FEATURE ESSAY

# Warburg's Etruscan Florentines

Lane Eagles

In his 1932 watershed study, pioneering art historian Aby Warburg accused fifteenth-century Florentine cosmopolitan elites of unabashedly emulating “the superstitious Etruscans” in their devotional art practice.

<sup>1</sup> This enigmatic quote—reproduced here in its porous entirety—has haunted art history for nearly a century:

By associating votive offerings with sacred images, the Catholic Church, in its wisdom, had left its formerly pagan flock a legitimate outlet for the inveterate impulse to associate oneself or one's own effigy with the Divine as expressed in the palpable form of a human image. The Florentines, descendants of the superstitious Etruscans, cultivated the magical use of images in the most unblushing form, right down to the seventeenth century....<sup>2</sup>

Warburg remarks upon an extraneous variety of Renaissance portraiture known as the *voti* or *boti*, full-scale waxwork effigies of patrician Italians. An eccentric historiographic remark upon an eccentric genre, this passage examines *voti* specifically dedicated to the *Madonna of the Annunciation*, a thaumaturgic fresco in Santissima Annunziata, Florence (fig. 1).<sup>3</sup> Warburg's text has not traversed decades of criticism unscathed. These words have been pried apart and dissected, opening debates concerning popular piety in fervently Catholic Renaissance Florence and meditations on the exact significance of Warburg's enigmatic verbiage. Warburg based his contention that the Santissima effigies operated magically upon Julius von Schlosser's 1910 treatment of wax portraits. Hugo van der Velden argues, however, that while the effigies were politically efficacious for the ruling class to maintain their presence in the minds of the public, they could not stand for the donor and were not linked to magic.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Aby Warburg, “The Art of Portraiture and the Florentine Bourgeoisie,” in *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity: Contributions to the Cultural History of the European Renaissance* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 1999), 189.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> The *Madonna of the Annunciation* is Florence's only *acheiropoieton*, an image created by divine intervention, which literally translates from the Greek as “not made by human hands.” *Acheiropoieta* were believed to be painted by godly, angelic, or divine hands. As such, it is Florence's most revered wonder-working image, a honor it has held for the last six hundred years. According to a local legend, in 1340 the Servite painter-priest Bartholomeus had labored over the fresco for several days, tormented by his inability to suitably render the face of the Virgin Mary. Yet what Bartholomeus lacked in artistic skill he well made up for in faith. He prayed for many nights, and was rewarded for his devotion when one morning he returned to his daunting project to find it miraculously finished. See Maria Husabo Oen, “The Origins of a Miraculous Image: Notes on the Annunciation Fresco in SS. Annunziata in Florence,” *Journal of Art History* no. 80 (2011), 5-7.

<sup>4</sup> The debate pits Warburg and Scholsser's shared contentions against van der Velden who maintains “that the effigies were simply representations of a spiritual process or attitude,” but not magical. See Christopher S. Wood, “The Votive Scenario,” *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* vol. 59, no. 60 (2011), 224, and Hugo van der Velden, *The Donor's Image: Gerard Loyet and the Votive Portraits of Charles the Bold* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2000), 126-385.

What did Warburg mean when he brandished the terms “pagan” and “magic?” This essay argues his comments refer specifically to sympathetic magic as a link between Etruscan and Florentine votive practices. Sympathy is the magical theory that a representation is numinously linked to the actual physical body of the represented person. It has long been central to magical phenomenon, and as a concept has informed magical practice spanning countless cultures. The theory depends on the law of contact or contagion, connecting like to like, but does not necessarily require verisimilar donor likeness to properly operate. Examining contemporary magical beliefs in both cultures clarifies Warburg’s words and the Santissima Annunziata cult itself.

The *Madonna of the Annunciation* fresco occupies the same spatial position today as it did upon its miraculous manifestation, in the back of Santissima Annunziata’s nave. Incited by its inherent divinity, the fresco has been considered miracle-working since its completion. To thank the fresco for bestowing blessings upon the populace, wealthy Renaissance Florentines commissioned life-sized waxwork effigies in their own likenesses for exhibition within the nave.<sup>5</sup> Effigy-style votives swelled in popularity during the early modern period; many churches in Italy hosted these devotional mannequins, but none was more popular than the cult that grew up around the Annunciation fresco in central Florence during the Quattrocento.

The sculptures foregrounded spectacle.<sup>6</sup> These figural dramas rendered in wax, precious metals, textiles, gemstones, and paint dominated the Basilica’s interior.<sup>7</sup> Specifically catered for the patron, the images were occasionally dressed in the actual clothing of the commissioner.<sup>8</sup> Life-sized knights astride horses covered in battle armor and high-ranking members of church hierarchy dressed in the robes of their order were among the most ostentatious.<sup>9</sup> One account tells of a true-to-life size pregnant woman depicted mid-labor atop an actual bed, hoping to be saved by the fresco from the dangers of childbirth.<sup>10</sup> Effigies of the most influential members of society—kings, nobles, and emperors—were positioned closest to the altar.<sup>11</sup>

The full-scale *voti* were a highly-regarded art form, Andrea del Verrocchio’s workshop having produced many of the more elaborate examples.<sup>12</sup> Among the most famous stood Lorenzo de’Medici’s effigy, created in response to his escape from the Pazzi conspiracy, which he credited to the *Madonna of the Annunciation*.<sup>13</sup> Vasari claims Verrocchio and fellow wax-worker Orsino Benintendi “portrayed from life” the Medici votives, creating sculptures “arranged so beautifully that nothing better or more true to nature

<sup>5</sup> Warburg, “The Art of Portraiture and the Florentine Bourgeoisie,” 190.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 189.

<sup>7</sup> Roberta Panzanelli, *Ephemeral Bodies: Wax Sculpture and the Human Figure* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2008), 14.

<sup>8</sup> Oen, “The Origins of a Miraculous Image,” 1.

<sup>9</sup> Megan Holmes, “Ex-votos: Materiality, Memory and Cult,” in *The Idol in the Age of Art: Objects, Devotions and the Early Modern World* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 166.

<sup>10</sup> Warburg, “The Art of Portraiture and the Florentine Bourgeoisie,” 207.

<sup>11</sup> Panzanelli, *Ephemeral Bodies: Wax Sculpture and the Human Figure*, 15

<sup>12</sup> Warburg, “The Art of Portraiture and the Florentine Bourgeoisie,” 190.

<sup>13</sup> On April 26, 1478, members of the Pazzi family endeavored to end the Medici’s de facto sovereignty over formally-republican Florence. Within the Duomo, Pazzi assassins converged upon the Medici as the priest raised the chalice for mass. Lorenzo il Magnifico was wounded and survived, but his brother Giuliano de’Medici perished in the attack. The Pazzi were subsequently exiled from Florence. See Richard Trexler, *Public Life in Renaissance Florence* (New York: Academic Press, 1980), 441.

could be seen....so lifelike and so well wrought that they seemed no mere images of wax, but actual living men."<sup>14</sup>

The wax effigy acted as a stand-in for the actual body, the living body, until the donor passed away and could be buried within the holy ground of the church. This forest of sculptures within Santissima Annunziata's nave eventually became so untamed that the effigies were suspended from the ceiling. Occasionally they proved too heavy for their cords and the artworks came crashing to the ground.<sup>15</sup> To cope with the massive weight of the votives, the walls of Santissima Annunziata had to be reinforced during the last decade of the fourteenth century.<sup>16</sup> The effigies eventually grew too numerous for the basilica's nave and were banished to the courtyard. Subsequently disposed of in the eighteenth century, none now survive.<sup>17</sup>

Warburg asserts Renaissance Florentines were acting upon unconscious impulses harkening back to ancient Etruria when commissioning and installing the Santissima wax sculptures.<sup>18</sup> To fully grasp the extent of Warburg's claim, the art historian must consider sympathy. While Warburg does not mention this branch of magic in his treatment, it is often linked to medieval and Renaissance votive practice in Western Europe and beyond.<sup>19</sup> Etruscans practiced sympathetic magic, and their votive traditions held striking parallels to their Florentine successors. Loose likenesses of individuals were often deposited in Etruscan tombs with the hope that their real-life counterparts would suffer untimely ends (fig. 2).<sup>20</sup> In Etruscan settlements like Caere and Vignaccia, small votives in the shape of single body parts including heads, eyes, ears, limbs, breasts, and internal organs such as livers and uteri have been unearthed (figs. 3 and 4). These generic, fragmented body parts call for divine attention as they ask a member of the Etruscan pantheon for safe delivery from disease or other medical malady.<sup>21</sup> Fashioned from terracotta or lead rather than wax, the sculptures were linked sympathetically with the victim, but not by resemblance.

While Renaissance Florentines also created fragmented body part votives, the Santissima effigies were apex portraits, the Platonic form of portraits, fully achieving the Renaissance dream of portraiture which rendered the sitter via mimetic, one-to-one verisimilitude of their lived physicality and physiognomy. While we cannot know exactly how accurately the wax effigies within Santissima Annunziata represented each and every member of the faithful, they nevertheless resembled the donor and stood for them in their absence. Period voices from the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries uphold Vasari's assertion that the Medici votives substituted their patrons. After the dynasty's dismissal from Florence in 1492, Medici

<sup>14</sup> Giorgio Vasari, "Andrea del Verrocchio," in *The Lives of the Artists*, Julia Conaway Bondanella & Peter E. Bondanella, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), Vol 2, 1550, 2.

<sup>15</sup> Oen and others pull this anecdote from the eyewitness account of fifteenth-century writer Franco Sacchetti. See Oen, "The Origins of a Miraculous Image," 3.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Warburg, "The Art of Portraiture and the Florentine Bourgeoisie," 190. In addition to the primary accounts Warburg glossed, the closest extant comparisons to the Santissima wax effigies are on display in Santa Maria della Grazie in Mantua, and date from the sixteenth century.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Wouter J. Hanegraaff, "Sympathy of the Devil: Renaissance Magic and the Ambivalence of Idols," *Esoterica* vol. 2 (2000), 2.

<sup>20</sup> For a more detailed explanation of this practice, as well as other examples of Etruscans using objects for magic see Sybille Haynes, *Etruscan Civilization: A Cultural History* (Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2000), 283.

<sup>21</sup> Jean MacIntosh Turfa, "Anatomical Votives and Italian Medical Traditions" in *Murlo and the Etruscans: Art and Society in Ancient Etruria*, Richard Daniel De Puma and Jocelyn Penny Small, eds. (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1994), 224.

effigies were taken down; in 1512 one of Giuliano was raised, then Pope Leo X's was destroyed in 1572.

<sup>22</sup> In this way, the turbulent waves of Medici expulsion and re-entrance into Florence were mirrored in the removal and re-installment of their wax likenesses. Contemporary accounts refer to these instances as "killing" the effigies, and acts of "murder," further evidencing the belief that the wax sculptures were considered successful donor surrogates.<sup>23</sup> In describing a controversy of a man forced to remove and rearrange some equestrian votives belonging to the powerful Falconieri family, contemporary writer Franco Sacchetti sarcastically penned, "may God forgive him."<sup>24</sup>

Materiality is likewise central to Warburg's contention. Warburg waxes poetic about wax, essentially arguing that the lost votives were very much portraits. Wax was intrinsically related to identity in fifteenth-century Florence. The practice of using seals to stamp one's heraldic insignia onto an important document was widespread during this period. A finished seal speaks of both the physical act of stamping (therefore relating to the living body) and as a solidified signifier of the stamper's personhood. A family's insignia, stamped in wax or recreated on a piece of armor, was considered a stand-in for a single member of that family.<sup>25</sup> The wax effigy embodies an imprint of the votary.

The Santissima Annunziata cult is a metonym for Renaissance magical thinking through material display. Renaissance Florence was, as Warburg asserts, a magical place. Bartolomeo Masi, a sixteenth-century Florentine, claimed Lorenzo de' Medici wore a magical ring on his finger. The gemstone set in the jewelry stored a genie, to which il Magnifico attributed his good health and fortune for many years.<sup>26</sup> The genius statesmen also employed experimental magicians in his court, Marsilio Ficino and Pico della Mirandola.<sup>27</sup> In accordance with Warburg, I maintain Renaissance Florentines enjoyed a flexible, pluralistic world view that allowed them to practice magic and Catholicism simultaneously.<sup>28</sup>

Warburg posited the idea that Renaissance Florentines had far from given up their Etruscan roots, and believes that this ancient society was still very much alive and manifesting in contemporary Florence. When this early art historian sensationally compared fifteenth-century Florentine elites to their Etruscan ancestors, Warburg located patterns across time and place in accordance with his typical methodology. And while it is dangerous for scholars to leap across centuries and tie together disparate historical threads, sympathy was well at work in Renaissance Florence, where the full-bodied effigies engendered the Catholic Basilica della Santissima Annunziata as a magical space. Renaissance Florence indirectly inherited sympathetic magic from the Etruscans by borrowing its practices, installing votive likenesses in response to divine intervention. While the Renaissance is often touted as an age of scientific obsession, fifteenth-century Florentines believed in the effectiveness of magic and pursued its influence in both religious and secular venues. At work within demon-haunted, pre-Protestant Europe, the wax effigy performed gratitude within the holy-yet-magical space of Santissima Annunziata.

<sup>22</sup> Hugo van der Velden, "Medici Votive Images and the Scope and Limits of Likeness," in *The Image of the Individual: Portraits in the Renaissance*, Nicholas Mann and Luke Syson, eds. (London: British Museum Press, 1998), 134.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 134-135.

<sup>24</sup> Warburg, "The Art of Portraiture and the Florentine Bourgeoisie," 205.

<sup>25</sup> Hans Belting, *An Anthropology of Images: Picture, Medium, Body* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 65.

<sup>26</sup> Richard Trexler, *Public Life in Renaissance Florence*, 446.

<sup>27</sup> Hans Peter Broedel, *The Malleus Maleficarum and the Construction of Witchcraft: Theology and Popular Belief* (New York: Manchester University Press, 2003), 174.

<sup>28</sup> Warburg, "The Art of Portraiture and the Florentine Bourgeoisie," 190-191.



**Lane Eagles** is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Washington, Seattle focusing on the history of art and visual culture of late medieval and Renaissance Italy. Her research focuses on gender, fashion, magic, and miracles. She is also an adjunct instructor of art history at Seattle Pacific University.



Figure 1. *Madonna of the Annunciation*, miracle-working fresco encased in enshrinement glass, circa 1340, Basilica della Santissima Annunziata, Florence, Italy (photo credit: author).



Figure 2. Figural Votive Offerings from Stipe del Cavone, 3<sup>rd</sup> – 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE, terracotta, AC 03, Museo di San Mamiliano, Sovana, Italy (photo credit: Creative Commons).



Figure 3. Anatomical Votive Offering from Central Italy, 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE, terracotta, TC 1333, Altes Museum, Berlin, Germany (photo credit: Creative Commons).



Figure 4. Anatomical Votive Offering from Central Italy, 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE, terracotta, Y 581, Altes Museum, Berlin, Germany (photo credit: Creative Commons).