How can we understand a work of art?

How is it that a work of art can be meaningful to us? My puzzlement arises from the fact that so many people can be touched by artistic productions elaborated in unknown languages, from unknown countries, from unknown cultures, and belonging to other times. How is it that we can be kept amazed, silent, gazing, in front of a painting by Raphael, or a symphony by Mozart, or an Amerindian statue?

We can find descriptions of such processes of understanding in history and in anthropology, but also in what Wittgenstein defines as the psychology of philosophy. I will show that the art historian Aby Warburg can throw light on the question of what happens in the process of understanding in the human brain. Warburg, also a philosopher and a psychologist, wondered why the same patterns always reappeared in different works of art, be it those of the American Indians, or those of the Italian Renaissance. The answer he gives to this question postulates the existence of a common human mental structure at work in the making and the understanding of a work of art.

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