

# Center for Cognitive Science

University at Buffalo, State University of New York

**Wednesday, October 2, 2002**

280 Park Hall  
North Campus  
2:00 pm –4:00 pm

## **“The Prehistory of Symbolic Forms”**

**Marie-Ann Lescouret, Ph.D.**

**Institute for the History of Art  
University of Strasbourg, France**

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.

*Marie-Anne Lescouret is associate professor of aesthetics in the University of Strasbourg, France. She is the author of books on Rubens, Goethe, Levinas and Paul Claudel, and the translator of works by Newton and Wittgenstein.*

**Refreshments will be available**

Everyone is welcome!

For information please call the Cognitive Science Office at (716) 645-3794 or check  
<http://www.cogsci.buffalo.edu/cogsci/html/2002fall.htm>