

PRESS RELEASE

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Terrible Beauty: Elephant – Human – Ivory

Ivory is fascinating – and polarizing. As early as 40,000 years ago, humans were using mammoth tusks to create musical instruments and intricate representational figures. In the more recent past, animal tusks have come to symbolize injustice and brutality. *Terrible Beauty: Elephant – Human – Ivory* addresses this topic with the help of a major programmatic temporary exhibition, a series of discussions and films, a programme of artistic events, and assorted educational activities.

The history of ivory also constitutes a history of humankind. All the way back in prehistoric times, people were making musical instruments and art and cult objects from tusks – these are the oldest such artefacts we know of. The material has an enduring value that has been prized over millennia by numerous cultures on different continents. The tusks themselves and the objects that are fashioned from them have been a perennial focus of human desire, taking the form of gifts and merchandise – and plunder. Ivory hunting has turned the elephant into an endangered species. The history of ivory objects thus also mirrors the process of cultural exchange, while also serving as an index of the capitalist accumulation of value, violent appropriation, and power imbalances.

The *Terrible Beauty* program addresses the Humboldt Forum's key focus: colonialism and coloniality. Consisting of an exhibition, a series of films and discussions, a Focus Day, educational events, and a publication, the programme examines the fraught connection between elephants, humans, and ivory. The programme's narrative has a global reach that spans different epochs, combining the cultural significance of ivory with elements of natural history and the social and ecological impact of its use. It looks at such questions as: How do we handle precious objects with a rich cultural history that are often linked to violent appropriation and power imbalances? How can we help recalibrate the relationship between humans and animals? And how can we engender a change in awareness to promote a more judicious use of resources?

Interdisciplinary Exhibition (runs from 20 July to 28 November 2021, every day except Tuesday from 10 am)

The exhibition combines insights from anthropology, archaeology, biology, ethnology, early history, history, art history, materials research, medicine, religious studies, and zoology. It sets out the millennia-old cultural history of ivory using a selection of exhibits from different epochs, offering a broad spectrum of different perspectives: from the material itself and ways of working with it to the colonial connotations of the tusk as a motif, from the influence of ivory on medicine and ideals of beauty to its role as a mark of refinement, from the elephant as quarry and as a species in need of protection, as a vital link in natural cycles and as a symbolic figure in religion, myth, and contemplative art. One of the largest exhibits is a Toyota belonging to the animal rights organization *Save the Elephant*, which was destroyed by an angry elephant; now the vehicle has made its way from Kenya to Berlin. A special element of the exhibition is *Voices of Ivory*: the installation gives various experts, conservationists, customs officials, and ivory collectors an opportunity to express their thoughts and opinions. Their sometimes controversial statements create a forum for different attitudes and a rich variety of perspectives, situating the topic in the relevant ethical, global, and political contexts.

The exhibition also examines whether and how ivory can be presented in museums in any way, shape, or form, given that it is such a charged biological material and constitutes the remains of a highly evolved sentient creature. The presentation here models an approach to this issue that reflects a new prototype for museums – as a setting for conversation and networking.

Over 200 objects have been brought together for the exhibition from a number of prestigious museums with a global reputation. These include the British Museum in London, the Museum of Applied Arts (MAK) in Vienna, the Musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac in Paris, and the Germanisches Nationalmuseum in Nuremberg.

Admission: Purchasing tickets online (possible from 13 July 2021) is strongly recommended at humboldtforum.org. Tickets are free of charge for the first 100 days.

The *Terrible Beauty* Program: Series of Discussions and Films, Focus Day, Educational Events, Publication

The accompanying programme comprising discussions, artistic and educational events, and a publication illuminates the topic from various perspectives. Based on the idea of including multiple voices, this programme will amplify the content of the exhibition and make use of the event spaces and other parts of the Humboldt Forum during the temporary exhibition and beyond.

From October 2021 onwards, a series of discussions will examine the relationship between elephants, humans, and ivory as a typical example of Western perceptions of nature, humankind, and culture. It is a coproduction with Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, the animal welfare organization IFAW, and other actors from civil society.

The film series presents a selection of films showing just how much elephants have always been figures that people have identified with and onto which they have projected their desires. It includes a total of 20 feature films, animations, and documentaries with a focus on elephants and humans, geared thematically to the exhibition. Around half the films were made for a family audience and are explicitly intended for children and teenagers. Starting in October 2021.

Featuring artistic input and discussion sessions, the Focus Day in January 2022 is an invitation to consider the topic from a wide range of artistic and discursive perspectives. There will be guided tours, talks with curators, debates with international guests, a family programme with hands-on activities, workshops with activists, and, last but not least, artistic performances.

The multifaceted educational programme starts in September 2021 with a range of activities and events. Public tours will take place five times a week and there will be an accompanied audio and hands-on tour focusing on ivory as a material. In addition to this, groups can take part in one-hour tours that will give them an overview of the programme as a whole. There will also be workshops for school classes in which everyone involved can delve into the topic in some depth.

The publication *Terrible Beauty: Elephant – Human – Ivory* takes up all the different thematic areas covered by the exhibition, with essays and visual materials contributed by international authors and artists. The book is also a standalone work that epitomizes the idea of the Humboldt Forum and the aspirations it espouses. With contributions by Asher Jay, Nanette Snoep, Ai Weiwei, and many more.

Hirmer Verlag, 200 pages, German and English edition, €29.90. Review copies are available in PDF format upon request by contacting presse@humboldtforum.org.

The exhibition is produced by the Stiftung Humboldt Forum im Berliner Schloss in cooperation with the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin and the Museum für Naturkunde Berlin, curated by Grit Keller, Alberto Saviello, and Daniel Tyradellis, in collaboration with Anika Winge, based on an idea by Raffael Dedo Gadebusch. In cooperation with the National Museums of Kenya. The discussion series was curated by Ibou Coulibaly Diop and Julia Schreiner, and the film series by Dorothee Wenner. The dates for both series and the Focus Day will be announced in September 2021.

One building – four actors: multiple perspectives are an inherent aspect of the synergy between the different partners. The Humboldt Forum is a cooperation between the Stiftung Humboldt Forum im Berliner Schloss, the Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz, with the Ethnologisches Museum and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst collections of the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, with the Humboldt Labor, and the Kulturprojekte Berlin and the Stadtmuseum Berlin, with the Berlin Exhibition.

The exhibitions on the ground floor and first floor (*History of the Site, Impressions: The Humboldt Brothers, Terrible Beauty: Elephant – Human – Ivory, Have a Seat! An Exhibition for Children, After Nature, BERLIN GLOBAL*) will open on 20 July. This will be followed on 22 September 2021 by the inauguration of the west wing of the second and third floors, where the Ethnologisches Museum, the Museum für Asiatische Kunst, and the roof terrace are located. The entire building will finally be open to visitors in the first half of 2022. The date for the press preview will be announced soon.

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